

THE COW WOMEN

George Gilbert

Rachael Mae
1940.

COW WOMEN

COW-WOMEN

A Western Story

By GEORGE GILBERT



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Cow Women

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COW WOMEN



CHAPTER I

FATE'S TANGLED WEB

KATE BRADON swung her supple, well-formed body lightly off White Tail, her favorite saddler, poised evenly on soles of trim, carefully booted feet, settled back onto small high heels, balanced to toes again and was firmly afoot, bridle rein held capably in the crook of her well-modeled arm. She stripped the horse of gear, clouted him easily into the corral, and went into the stable to snap the saddle and bridle onto the peg of polished pecan wood.

"Vangie!" she called vibrantly.

The house door swung wide. A lathy girl, with carrotty curls dangling, came out, her loose calico wrapper slatting, as the wind whipped the plaided skirts of her mother. Vangie had a paper-bound novel upon which her eyes were fixed, as she put the back of her shapely left hand to her mouth to half smother a yawn that ended in: "Wha-a-at, maw-w-w-w!"

"Made any motion to'rd dinner yit?"

"Fire's lighted, water heatin', and—aw-w-w-w-aw-w!" The back of her hand again covered a yawn, showing a palm not calloused, but pinkly pretty. Perhaps Evangeline knew that and yawned to enable her to show off her hands. A half yawn that shows even, white teeth, lips firm of texture and nicely colored, dimples on chin and cheeks, gives an excuse for hiding a large nose, thin eyebrows, and a freckled pair of cheek bones. Such a half

yawn may not be half bad in a feminine battery of attack. Practice in half yawns was always good, even on one's mother, Vangie thought.

"Yes, that's all, Vangie! Been readin' that fool love tale!" Striding houseward, Kate swept in like a steady breeze past Vangie, casting disapproving eyes at signs of housework neglected by the girl all morning, while the mother had been riding circle to estimate the condition of her stock.

"Yo'll git yourn, Vangie," Kate threatened.

"Aw, maw, I got in this story t' my neck and aw-w-w-w"—her hand went up to cover the yawn—"when——"

Kate calmly caught the girl a box alongside her head. Vangie, turned sullen, lopped onto a rawhide-strung couch, sticking out her under lip.

"Just f'r that, I won't tell th' news from Bar Six," she said, sucking in that creased under lip provokingly.

Kate was at her side like a flash, eyes aglow: "Vangie, what is it?"

"Brazos goin' by—he said—I won't tell!"

"Won't? Then I'll clout it out o' yo'."

The mother's hand descended onto the girl's shrinking, nicely rounded shoulder steadily till the count was twelve. Vangie's face darkened, and her lip was pushed ever farther out. She squared herself and defied her parent.

"No, not if I rot——"

There was a rattle of hoofs outside and a hail. "It's Braz, now! He'll tell, yo' spittin' bobcat."

The mother hastened out. The girl, who had shown no weakness in her presence, flopped on the couch, sobbing, not weakly, but with the suggestion of animal hatred in every gasp, for the girl was impulsive, intense, emotional, with great latent possibilities for good or evil.

Nothing in Vangie's life had made for softness. She was the daughter of a good-natured old-time cowman who never had had ambition enough to use a multiplying branding iron in the older days when every cow was held to have at least twin calves. Riley Bradon had jogged out of life ten years before, leaving his small herd and ranch, ambitious wife and pretty daughter. Kate Parsons had been biscuit shooter in a restaurant in Tin Cow when Riley had married her. Handsome as a girl, she retained her good looks now. Kate had managed the ranch and kept up Riley's brand, Circle Dot X, capably. Men on near-by ranches winked at things she did or had done for her. Her lone hand was old "Pappy" Yeagers, then out fencing, in a suddenly soft dobe patch, against straying calves.

Outside, Kate Bradon went to the stirrup of a heavy-set, active man who swayed in his Mexican saddle. His horse was a chunky roan, with a nice ripple of dapples on lower neck and forequarters. The horse's gear was the best. Brazos Kingston's florid face showed pleasure, as he leaned to whisper his question: "Vangie tell it?"

His face darkened as Kate shook her head.

"What's in her?" he demanded with surly impatience.

Kate laughed. "Gettin' moon-eyed over paper novels."

"Yes, Kate, but listen." He paused impressively, and his roan stamped and shook his neck, making the silver trimmings on the bridle jangle. "Whoa, thar, Comet," Brazos said to quiet him. Then to Kate: "Melitia Frazer's sickness is gone bad again."

"Real bad?"

"They sent for another doc," he answered, dark eyes glittering.

"Then——"

"It may come out as we said when it first seemed she was booked for——" He jerked his thumb toward the distant ranges to complete his sentence.

Kate's eyes, hazel they seemed, but when they flashed, as now, they gave flecks of greenish fire and gleamed. "They'll need a housekeeper then. Ed Frazer's hinted he'd like me." Her close-lipped smile did not stir the tanned cheeks, with their under color of old rose.

"Yes, Kate. Once yo' git thar——"

"I won't forget yore part, Braz," she said, with a quick pat on the back of the gloved hand he rested on the saddle's horn.

"I'm to be Bar Six foreman, in place of Jim Easton?"

"Yes."

"An' when yo've made a stake workin', yo're to marry me, an' we throw in t'gether here on Circle Dot X—my savin's an' those cattle I got hid out in Lost Cañon, t' go with yore cattle an' improvements?"

He leaned toward her, his eyes hungry for her decision. She returned his gaze with a fervor that convinced him. "Yes, we stand t'gether, Braz."

Kingston's horse wheeled, and soon a swirling dust column, far up the trail, told of his speedy departure. For a moment, Kate stood with hands clasped behind her back, then she went indoors, thoughtful. Vangie was stirring about tasks long neglected. Kate did not attempt to chastise the girl again. She began to prepare the noon meal. After a time: "Vangie, I've heard what yo' kept back."

"Uh-huh." Vangie was occupied with a piece of chewing gum lately retrieved from the arm of a chair.

"I'm goin' t' be Bar Six housekeeper."

"Been asked yitty, maw?"

"No, but I'll be."

"Sure?" The girl was exasperatingly curious.

"Yes, there's proof! Big Jim Easton!"

Rattle of hoofs was heard outside. At the door they found a man swinging from his saddle, a man erect, with thin, steel-muscled legs, wide hips, big shoulders. His gloved hand doffed his sombrero in salute, his gray eyes shimmered with interest in his mission. "Mawnin', Missus Bradon an' Vangie," he drawled.

"How's Mrs. Frazer?" Kate asked with neighborly interest.

"As to her," his fine eyes misting, his throat working, as he strove for mastery over grief, "all's well with our dea' lady."

"All's well?" the two women asked in unison.

"Ya-es," he replied distinctly, "our dea' lady—she's gone over th' Silvery Ranges."

In the ensuing silence Vangie sympathetically bowed her head, and Kate hid a look of triumph by following her example for a hypocritical moment.

Jim addressed her: "Miste' Frazer, he asks, will yo' be Bar Six housekeeper, while we're upshot, Missus Bradon. Miss Prime, she's plumb down on her luck, an' we all are. Boys'll ride this way between times to see that Circle Dot X don't suffer."

"I couldn't refuse—not at a time like this," replied Kate, pretending to wipe away a tear. Vangie sniffed and went toward the house. Her mother spoke: "I'll be right over, soon's I pack a bag."

Easton saluted gravely, mounted and whisked uptrail in a mounting fog of murk. He was riding his big *alazan*, that could travel like the wind when urged. José, Bar Six's mail rider, because of the horse's kind ways, big, loyal eyes and shining red coat, had called him once "*serene y*

brillar," or "serene and brilliant," and Jim, liking the phrase, had coined of it a name for his horse: Brilar.

Hastening indoors, Kate could hardly conceal her joy. Vangie was crying, for Mrs. Frazer had often dealt kindly with the lonely girl. Every one loved Melitia Frazer and her only daughter, Prime, who was like her mother in many ways, yet with a liberal streak of Frazer bravery for emergencies.

Kate began to pack everything that would add to her attractions—ribbons, bits of lace. Vangie, throwing down the novel, watched. Suddenly the girl ran to her mother, put her soft arms about her neck and began to wheedle:

"Maw, if I ask, will yo' do so'thing?"

"What?"

"Maw, I'm ashamed to come right out, bold!"

"Talk, don't whine. Be a woman, a range woman—a cow woman. Those paper-back novels turned yore blood t' milk?" She pushed Vangie aside.

Vangie sniffed. Kate raged at her anew.

"Yo' pulin', no-'count fool. Buck up, be a woman." When aroused she was apt to revert to cowboy phrases, yet at need she could talk softly.

"Maw, yo're goin' to Bar Six?"

"Yes," replied Kate harshly.

"I'll be alone—'cept for Pappy Yeagers."

"That Trescott boy, that rides for Bar Six, he'll moon 'round," the mother retorted, as she bent to stuff another bright ribbon into her bag.

"Aw, Carl Trescott! Pah! Tres, he's a boy. I'm hunting a man."

"Who? Want a man? Go git him, as I'm doin'."

"Maw, are yo' goin' t'——"

"Shet that fool red haid. I ain't said nawthing. Now, who's yore man? Come, girl days are done

for you. Who yo' goin' t' marry?" The wolfish nature of the older woman blazed forth avidly.

Vangie felt her heart throb stormily. Her face was suffused with self-conscious shame. She fought down the words which her mother's taunt tried to force from her.

"Jim Easton!" Vangie yielded her secret, as she put up her hands to cover her burning face. Kate pulled them aside and smiled in triumph.

"I thought no poor puncher wouldn't hold yo' when yo' got sense. Aim high! Why not? Yo' for th' foreman—I for the Big Augur. Kiss me!"

The two kissed and so made up their compact. The girl sank to the couch, and Kate snapped the bag's clasp and tied the string. In a few moments the whirring rattle of her buckboard told of her going.

CHAPTER II

DRIFTING SHADOWS

FACING south, with the overhanging roof on east and west sides, the big house of Bar Six cast an oblong shade on the eastern garden, one afternoon, a month after Mrs. Frazer's burial. Tables and chairs were set out under the gallery. Outside, a garden bloomed, kept from drought by an *acequia's* trickle. Laid at great cost, the fount had been the apple of the dead woman's eye. Masses of native poppies, windflowers, hardy phlox, single roses of the foothills and towering larkspur held the eye, as color waves beat up from the little Eden.

Ed Frazer, with a cool drink at his elbow, lounged in an easy-chair. Seated at a distance, sewing, was Kate Bradon. The pink of the material she was working on cast not unpleasant reflections against her rounded cheek, as she snipped off a thread's end with a provoking display of white teeth. Kate had put aside the half masculine ways of the cow woman and now seemed a true home body.

So Frazer's eyes would stray from the drip of the fount, the blaze of the garden's prismatic hues, to the woman, so quietly at ease in the chair where so recently another woman, sweetly quiet always, had been. Kate had found that Melitia's chair suited her, and she had taken possession of it.

"Missus Bradon," Frazer said, "I sure was 'fraid what might happen when my wife went. I did dread bringing in an outsider; but I make bold to say yo've used we-all white. I thank you."

A long speech for Frazer! He generally spoke little, even to Jim Easton, with whose methods of getting work out of the hands Ed never interfered, for Jim was a good foreman, close-mouthed, fearless, efficient, able to do more with gun, rope, and branding iron than he asked of the men under him. Jim, who was thirty, had been with Bar Six since he was ten.

"I wouldn't mind"—Kate's full voice came through the fount's silvery tinklings—"only for Vangie, hived up with just Pappy Yeagers."

"Sure gotta think o' Vangie, as I do o' Prime," replied Frazer feelingly.

He stirred uneasily, spun his glass, reached for a cigar, bit clean through its head, with a vigor telling of fine teeth and perfect health.

Ed Frazer was young at fifty, his blond mustache well cared for, his face fresh-colored, his hair just silvered, his form still trim, a handsome man in his easeful ways. But beneath the velvet outer man was a core of chilled steel. To women he gave old-fashioned courtesy; to men exact justice—at gun's point if need be.

He had married Melitia Grahame on a visit to relatives in Virginia. She was the belle of that Old Point season, fairest flower of the Old Dominion in beauty and breeding. Melitia, or Mellie for short, had governed mildly, wisely in the big house, and Kate Bradon, coming among the well-trained servants so suddenly, at first had sensed friction. But, with her wits on edge for such warnings, Kate set all to rights soon. Now she was "foreman" inside, as Big Jim was outside.

"Vangie's some offish, Mr. Frazer," Kate said, neatly sewing a felled seam. "I've had to raise her range style."

"My Prime, she's wide an' liberal in her ideas,

too." Frazer permitted himself a chuckle, the first since his loss had darkened his soul.

"Yes, Prime, she likes the outdoors best. Well, so do I," answered Kate, simulating a burst of womanly frankness. Then she became silent, as if she had revealed a secret she should have kept.

"You had to be out—a lone woman, tending yo' cattle," replied Frazer warmly.

"I'll say I always had good neighbors to help."

"Oh, Bar Six ain't lettin' no widow woman's cows get lost."

The water tinkled, while clouds, drifting over, laid umbers on the bright-hued garden of the dead woman. Then the sun shone again.

"Can yo' stay long here?" Frazer asked impulsively. He had dreaded that question, hating to bring in even a neighbor to fill death's gap in his household. Now he wanted her to stay, for she had proved agreeable to them all.

Ed Frazer did not want Bar Six, indoors, to slip from womanly neatness to slattern shiftlessness, such as he had observed in homes of other range men who had lost helpmates and taken up with border termagants of doubtful standing, or remarried hastily to get a housekeeper. Frazer never had had to think of the well-ordered domestic routine, when Mellie was alive, and he had been relieved to find Kate had kept all going smoothly. Cooking, baking, sweeping, dusting, weaving, washing, ironing—all were done well.

Kate got along even with Prime, over whose future Frazer had studied through the long, sleepless hours of the nights following his bereavement. The girl, just twenty, sore stricken when her gentle mother had gone, had rallied by now to outward seeming. If Prime grieved in private, she hid the

worst of the hurt, that she might be cheerful in public for her dear dad's sake.

Kate Bradon's white teeth snipped another thread; the sewing fell to her lap. She was all in white, with a touch of black, here and there, a most effective dress for one of her rich coloring. Indoor living had softened her rich complexion, and she now assumed a wistful, yearning expression in talking of Vangie's future. "It will all depend on my girl, Mr. Frazer."

"She could be back an' fo'th."

"Yes, Mr. Frazer," replied Kate, sounding that formal 'Mr.' firmly, "she might."

"She could do that li'l' thing."

"Yes, but she won't," insisted Kate.

"Oh!" exclaimed Frazer, perplexedly rumpling his hair.

"My first duty's to my girl." Kate was keenly alive to what this point would suggest to Ed Frazer. "I can't rightly leave Vangie alone no more." The woman settled into her chair's depths, taking up her work again.

Frazer's face grew red. He rubbed his head, but it seemed absolutely blank. Then he did strike the spark of an idea, perchance one Kate had been hoping for. "Why not bring Vangie here?"

Frazer paused, and Kate sewed on.

"Bring her to Bar Six. Jim'll have the hands run Circle Dot X."

"I hadn't otta," Kate replied, a bit of frontier slang clinging to those full lips unaccustomed to it. She bit them, paused, glanced at him aslant.

Ed was gazing at the outer spaces. "I might find another housekeeper—later," he said desperately. A slow, triumphant smile drifted over the subtle woman's face, as cloud shadows drifted over the dead woman's garden.

"I'll have her come here, poor girl, a while. Maybe we c'n find a housekeeper for you-all—later," answered Kate.

"I'll send Easton to ride over to Circle Dot X with word for Miss Vangie right away. There he comes now!"

There was a thrumming of hoofs below, and two horses came up at a gentle lope. Easton, who rode Brilar, saluted, then swung down to stand at the stirrup of Prime, who had ridden in beside him on Thunder.

The girl came down with a swinging ease that proved there had been no need for the foreman's assistance, as she had dismounted; but it was custom. Since girlhood Jim had been her loyal retainer, teaching her fine points of horsemanship, standing between her and punishment when she had indulged in youthful madcap pranks, coaching her until she could outshoot all Bar Six, save her father and Big Jim. So Jim now naturally stood at her stirrup and took the reins. Prime tossed Jim a flashing smile, a murmur of thanks. Jim went, spurs ajingle, to give the horses to the care of eager Mexican lads before returning to the big house, where he had his own room, for he was as a son to Frazer.

Prime glanced from Ed to Kate, on her brow a thoughtful pucker, as she swung her hat down to slat against her knee, dusting it like a boy. Kate smiled quietly and sewed on. Ed motioned for Prime to sit down, but she remained erect, flirting her hat atop her braids neatly. It was a gray wide-brim, silver-banded, with a tassel of silver wires beside her right ear.

Her riding dress was of gray velvet cord, knickers of the same. Her tiny spurs, on her high-heeled boots, were like ornaments. She was not large,

but she was strongly built. Her eyes were widely spaced, like those of a good-tempered horse, and her brow high. Her hair was light brown, matching the sunny brown of her eyes, as she held the loyal gaze of her father. She spoke to him, using her pet nickname for him:

"What is it, Big Augur?" Prime's own cowboy name was "Little Augur."

Frazer smiled at the word of endearment. "Missus Bradon's agreed to stay another spell."

CHAPTER III

LITTLE WORRIES

INTO the workaday life of Big Jim Easton little worries began to creep. They arose out of almost indefinable matters, matters that were hardly the business of a hired man to speak of to his employer, a hired man who had the name for being sagacious and who was sagacious—in dealing with men.

First, Vangie Bradon, with her full lower lip kept properly tucked in, her carrotty hair reduced to partial submission, was apt to ask a favor of Big Jim now and then. She needed advice as to how to use the pinto pony Ed Frazer had set aside for her use.

There was not a thing about that pinto that Vangie did not know, for she was range bred and could ride a "sunfisher" into submission, if called upon, and had done it merely for the fun of it at home. But that pinto pony developed a tender mouth, contracted a mysterious nigger brand, got what seemed like a mange spot at the root of his tail—in reality it came from fire seed rubbed there secretly by Vangie—and so on.

Big Jim drawled advice to the girl and managed to keep his temper. She was his employer's guest, ate of the Bar Six salt and bread. Vangie belonged and must be treated well.

Again, Easton found it increasingly easy to slip away to his own room to read, or strum low of evenings wandering words on his guitar, which he played well in a lazy, appealing fashion, his slender, white fingers—kept clean and immaculate by the long gauntleted gloves his trade called for—caress-

ing the strings with subtle touches of melancholy minors, his smooth baritone lilting some trail song or plaintive lullaby.

Once Frazer had had Jim in often to discuss ranch work. Now Frazer found it increasingly easy to sit inside in silence, while Kate Bradon sewed, and to listen to her plans for this or that detail of house-keeping. In this way she managed to keep herself in Frazer's mind and the importance of her work constantly before him.

Then, too, like grains of sand irritating the corner of a man's eye, little mishaps had begun to crop up in ranch work. There was a break in a Bar Six tank, on a little creek that came from up Lost Cañon way; a fire had burned much of Bar Six's eastern grazing land; and proofs were not wanting that rustlers were branding Bar Six's calves north of their proper range. More important still, there were traces of bad humor among the hands, seemingly centering about one Hart Trantor, a new man whom Jim had marked out for dismissal unless he reformed.

One evening the guitar and low-voiced song palled on Jim. Prime was in her room writing letters. Easton strolled out and smoked for a while under the gallery, where only the tinkle of the dead woman's fountain told of former peace. Easton lounged toward the stables, seeking for equine companionship, making sure Brilar was well cared for—and the others, too.

The bunk houses stood a little way to the north. The horse corral was between them and the big house, the stable about east of the big house. A big wired-in paddock permitted the private mounts to have plenty of exercise, and the merry Mexican lads learned a preliminary apprenticeship in horse-

manship in watching over the needs of the gentled saddlers.

Because it added to his foreman's prestige with the hands, and because he liked to have it so, Frazer had Easton keep his top horse, Brilar, with the horses reserved for the use of the folks in the big house. Thunder, of course, was there, leaning over the bars of the stable corral, as Easton came up. Thunder whickered, and Jim patted his velvety muzzle in play and then gave the horse the tobacco he craved.

After a time, hearing the murmur of voices from the direction of the chuck houses, Easton idled along in that direction. He convinced himself that he wanted to talk a bit with Jarvis Larrabee, his lieutenant, about certain matters they were to go over before the men rode in the morning.

It was full dusk, the air like a touch of a soft, clean hand. The stars seemed low and caught in a sea of faintest haze, which they accentuated. A faint sickle of moon rode low in the west, and afar a coyote hymned the coming night.

The murmur of voices dribbled off to the steady, even speech of a man telling a story, while the others listened. Easton knew that voice, so slow, tauntingly insistent—Trantor's voice. As he stopped at the corner of the building, he could see the black, easily disposed shapes on the blankets they had spread out to sprawl on.

Easton sensed a rather queer hesitancy in the story-teller's tones, as he came to a stand at the edge of the group. He could not make out the features of the men, except when one or another drew hard on his cigarette, the glow lighting up some well-known feature—the lantern jaw of Trantor in the group's center, the smooth, boyish features of Carl Trescott, the pock-marked, heavy face of

loyal and tried Jarve Larrabee. A rather heavy-set man on the farther outskirts of the lazing lot of easeful men he failed to identify. Easton leaned against the corner of the bunk house and dropped a casual greeting.

"Evenin', boys," he said and waited.

For a second or so it seemed that Trantor would not go on with his tale. The heavy-set man, over there in the deeper gloom, said something so low that Easton did not catch it, and Trescott, who had, spoke:

"Le's have the rest of that yarn, Trant."

There seemed to go from them a round of sighs, and several shifted positions, as men will when anxious over something. Trantor's voice came again, slow, even:

"So that J Nine outfit, down there in Ardaka County, that I rode with, had to get a new foreman. Their old one, he had posed as a mammoth, had bluffed every one off his range by just lookin' big and saying little. Better men than he did th' dirty work of the job, an' he got the credit. He put it onto me too much one day, like I been sayin', and he looked into the mouth of a right good gun, and he bowed down low an' ate dirt. O' cou'se he couldn't live in that range then, and he got out. A man is good till his bluff is called—no longer."

Silence followed. Men shifted about on their blanket-resting places. Faces here and there lighted up, as men puffed deeply, like men will do at a tale's end. Then came that slow voice again:

"Ever hear a story like that, Easton?"

Big Jim did not shift his position. It seemed that he was not going to reply. Men breathed deeper and shifted again. Suddenly the stub of Easton's cigarette flicked out, propelled by his practiced thumb's flip, and landed right in the lap of the

story-teller. Its sparks, like a tiny flash light, showed the lean, lithe man there, his right hand over on his left hip, gripping the butt of his gun. Jarve's firm hand was on the man's gun, like a flash.

"All ready to sting, without even the fair play of a rattler that gives warning!" Easton spoke softly.

Silence ensued for ten heartbeats. The cigarette's sparks had gone out, and the story-teller was in the shadow again. The heavy-set man at the fringe of the group growled something, a loud growl that gave Easton the clew he sought to the man's identity!

Easton leaped, catlike, over them all. His lean fingers closed upon the throat of the growler, and they surged upright together. The grumbler choked, coughed. Easton's voice came anew:

"You, Brazos! I warned you off Bar Six once. Take your dirty tool with you and go, while you can go alive. I didn't tell th' boys you was barred here, for I thought you'd keep away, once warned off. Now they all know it."

There was a little struggle on the ground, and Larrabee was thrusting Trantor forward. The two were together now and, ringed in by Bar Six folks, were wisely silent.

"Let them loose," Easton ordered.

"Take their guns?" Larrabee asked.

"No, dogs like them aren't much," he replied contemptuously.

"You got plenty nerve to put it onto us when we're outnumbered," Trantor began.

"Shet up," Brazos exclaimed.

Trantor obeyed.

"Knows his master's voice," Larrabee said, as he let go of Trantor, who went to get his saddle and other belongings. He had a private horse that was

caught out for him, and in a few moments he was riding away with Brazos.

Once he called back something about his pay, but Easton ordered him to "ramble far and wide, and his pay'd overtake him soon." So they went, raging.

"I've suspected Trantor for weeks of being a trouble maker," Easton said to Larrabee, "but I had nothing to go on."

"Well, you called his bluff, pronto. He's never tired of talkin' 'bout how they punch cows down near the border, as if that was where Abraham first tended cattle and started th' beef business."

"I don't think Trant's so bad," young Carl cut in, a palpable breach of manners when the foreman and his lieutenant were conferring.

"You'll have a lot of thoughts before yo're twenty-one, boy," Big Jim remarked kindly, instead of giving him the reproof he deserved.

Easton took Larrabee aside and went over the items he had come to discuss with him. After a few moments they came back to the men. There was a constraint about the group again, and a clatter of hoofs explained it. Carl swung around the corner of the bunk house, mounted.

"I'm ramblin'," he informed Easton, with a surly inflection.

"So?" quietly asked Easton. "Thought it over well, boy? We like you here."

"Yes. I'm a hand, no kid to be ramcatted 'round. I'm ramblin'."

"Jarve, you got 'nuff loose money to pay him?"

Larrabee reached for his bill fold.

The boy leaned over, took the little wisp of bills, punched them airily into his pocket, raised his elbows to a comedy-riding pose, and spoke with meaning:

"So long, punchers."

No word for Big Jim, who had taught him so much, or for Jarve, who had been so patient with him. His horse's hoofs thrummed, and his gay little song floated back to them:

"Ramblin' down th' honey trail,
I'll git money without fail—
We'll be married, don't you fear,
I'll be back for you next year."

"I hated to lose that kid. He had th' makin's," Jarve said. "Where's he goin'?"

"He'll join that Trantor. I been noticing Trantor's been soaping 'round that kid, gettin' him t' shag for him, fillin' his fool head with stories of what they do down along the border. I'm 'fraid——" Big Jim was silent then and turned away. Then he bethought him of something.

"Find a way to get Trantor's pay check to him, Jarve. Send it in care of Brazos, to Tin Cow, where he gits his mail."

Jarve assented. Easton strolled away moodily. The incident had stirred bitter depths in him. To have this malign, outside influence reach in and taint the loyalty of one of the men of Bar Six was like gall to Easton. He stopped at the stable corral again to ask for equine companionship. He heard the whicker of a horse when he called, and Brilar came. He petted him, and after a moment he went away, but he heard him nipping at the grass. Then he called for Thunder. He heard him snort and the beat of his hoofs.

Then some one was beside Big Jim, some one who reached through the bars and patted the glossy, arched neck. Some one was leaning against Big Jim confidingly and talking a bit wildly:

"Oh, Jim, I've come to bid Thunder good-by. I'm going to let him go—I'm going to give him up! I hope she's good to him—I love him so."

"You gone plumb crazy, Little Augur?" anxiously asked Easton, but not drawing away, as she snuggled to him for comfort, while she rubbed the horse's smooth coat.

"No, Jim, but dad asked me just now, when I came down from writing my letters—he asked me——"

"What, Little Augur?"

"He didn't really ask me, but he hinted——"

"Yes." Big Jim was trying to encourage her.

"That he'd like to have Mrs. Bradon use Thunder for her saddler while she's here."

"Confound it, I won't let her!"

Little Augur drew away quickly, and her breath came sharp and eagerly. "Oh, Jim, you mustn't say that."

"I know it—I'm a fool."

"No, you're a nice, big, beautiful man, and I love you for it. But she can have Thunder while she's here. I'll do what I can to keep the peace."

"Yes, it won't last forever, Little Augur." His voice was soft and wheedling, as it had been when he first sat her on a horse and urged her not to be afraid. "She'll be gone soon——"

"If I only thought so—if I only thought so! I'm beginning to be afraid, Jim—I——"

"Of what, Little Augur? Tell me, so I can help you."

"No, this isn't anything you can do for us. If it was, I know you'd do it. Good night, Jim. Let her have old Thunder—for the sake of peace."

CHAPTER IV

MAN PROPOSES

AFTER his early round on the morrow Easton lounged toward the big house. Frazer and Kate Bradon were under the gallery. Apart, Prime swung in a hammock of gay weave, one pretty toe touching the building to keep the true rhythm of her swing. Prime was apparently absorbed in a book. Kate was all in white, a most handsome "Lady in White," sewing a fine seam!

"Want anything in Tin Cow to-day, sir," Jim asked of Frazer.

"Ridin'?"

"Yes, we're two hands shy."

"Bar Six grub gone bad?"

"Grub's O. K., sir. Men didn't both quit. One was helped to git."

"How come?"

"That new hand—Trantor."

The spool of the Lady in White rolled bobbly down. Had she been leaning too far forward, listening, perchance? Easton picked the spool up gravely, took off his hat, and presented it with a low bow: "At yore service, Missus Bradon."

Kate relaxed with a laugh that was half a sigh: "I'm clumsy."

Jim's slow, sure glance swept up to Little Augur in her hammock. She had ceased to swing, and the book hung unregarded in one limp hand. Her eyes were widely alert; her ears, no doubt, as well. She, too, noting that she was being scrutinized, sank back, apparently at ease. Easton had not told her the night before the details of the scene he had had with Brazos, Trantor, and young Carl.

"What was wrong with Trantor?" Frazer asked impatiently.

"At first nothing but suspicion. Last night Brazos sneaked up to th' bunk house an' he was loungin' with our hands——"

"Brazos? After you warned him, for me, not to come to Bar Six?"

"Yes, sir. Since we told him last spring a few of us had eyes on how he was able to live without workin' much, he's been plumb hostile. I never told the boys on Bar Six 'bout that talk we had with Brazos, because we had only suspicions to go on, and it's not fair to condemn a man complete with no evidence. So, when he crept in among th' hands last night, they took it in good part."

"Yes, Bar Six always has a blanket and grub for decent visitors, and I hope always will."

Kate Bradon was leaning outward again, the better to hear. Little Augur's foot had ceased its office of propulsion. So much Easton caught from the corner of his eyes, while he continued to regard his employer interestedly, as Frazer inquired for further details of the affair.

"Oh, Trantor, he was gassin' 'bout how bad men are down along the border of Old Mex. He was aimin' his remarks at me, his hand on his gun butt. I heard Brazos' voice—first I knew he was there, egging Trant on. Jarve and I told them to pull their freight."

"But who was the other of our hands?"

"Carl Trescott. Good boy, but he's heard Trant make braggadocio, and he's nacherly got romance in his fool young head."

"Hope they don't make him rue his decision none," said Frazer, a fatherly interest in his deep, full tones.

"I hope not, too."

"I'm not sorry Trescott's gone," said the Lady in White, and Easton thought he detected a waspish note in her voice. He noted how Prime started at the sound of her voice, as if at hearing something sinister.

"Oh, how come?" replied Frazer, as he gave her eager attention. She had drawn back again, and the needle was going smoothly, the spool reposing carefully on her ruffy lap.

"He's been goggling at my Vangie for weeks. Vangie will do better than Carl Trescott, I'll be bound." She snipped off the thread decisively.

Easton glanced at Frazer, on whose face a show of deeper red appeared.

"A likely Bar Six hand ain't so bad for a gal hereabouts! I always give my married hands a house, garden, and two private hosses to start with——"

Kate Bradon tossed her head, then, noting that Frazer was still irritated to have Bar Six opportunities belittled, seemed to agree.

"You are good to your hands, Mr. Frazer, but Vangie isn't on the marry—yitty." The slang word slipped from her before she could bite it back. Instead she bit her full, bowed lip and took up her sewing again.

"If she's not on th' wed, that's different," replied Frazer, mollified.

Easton returned to his original thought. "If you have anything I can do in town, sir——"

"Some letters to mail. I want them to go to-day." Rising to get them, he brushed past Kate Bradon, who sewed calmly on.

Easton glanced over at Little Augur, who was not reading yet. Her brows were puckered, and her eyes were seeing only distant things. He noted with pleasure the fullness of her rounded cheeks and the grace of her pose in the swaying hammock.

Then Frazer was back, fidgeting around among some papers on the table under the gallery. The Lady in White continued to sew demurely.

Frazer spoke to her: "Missus Bradon, did you see two letters, in long, blue envelopes, like those I keep in my desk inside?"

"About so long"—holding up two shapely forefingers—"and so wide?" Kate was precise in her measurements of the air, and perchance she was glad that his eyes, lured by the upheld fingers, wandered past them to rest upon the handsome features of her animated face.

"Yes, Missus Bradon," said Frazer, relieved to find that she knew of them.

"I thought you'd want them mailed, so I sent José Almonte in and told him to bring the mail."

Quite simple that explanation, and she resumed her stitching. If a shade of annoyance crossed Frazer's forehead, Easton had to be quick of glance to note it. If Little Augur swung a bit viciously now, because her pointed toe dug sharply against the wall, Easton had to be sensitive to her every mood to know it. Heretofore only Ed Frazer had given orders to José, the trusted mail rider of Bar Six.

Frazer sat down and spoke to Easton. "No, Jim, nothin' special on my 'count."

"Anything for you, Miss Prime?"

"No, thanks," said Prime, not languidly, as was her habit, but rather quickly.

Easton half turned, then bethought himself that politeness required what perhaps his mood had been prompting him to overlook—that the woman, whom his employer delighted to honor and praise to them all, should not be overlooked. "And you, Missus Bradon?" His hat went off to her again.

"Nothing, thank you, Mr. Easton," she answered assuredly and finally.

"Queer, no one wants anything in Tin Cow," Easton said. "Well, I don't want much, only two cow hands, and they are mighty scarce animiles."

"Shake a foot, Tonio," said Easton playfully to the slim, erect fellow down at the home stables. "I'm ridin' pronto."

Brilar, snorting in friendly glee, soon was under saddle, and Jim swung aboard. Tonio—short for Antonio—waited for the wonted largesse, a truly fine cigarette from a tin-foil package that the good Señor Easton gave with a merry jest. Then, as if it were a mere afterthought, Jim asked:

"How long ago did José ride, Tonio?"

"Weethen th' hour, señor. Adios!"

"Adios," answered Easton, already on his way.

Chin high, swaying lightly, Jim rode, letting Brilar ease the sun-gilded miles behind them. José gone an hour? But for one thing, Jim would have thought of the Bar Six mail rider as being in Tin Cow by now. But look you, men of heart! A bit to one side of that straggling cow town was the *jacal* of one Allegro Contradine y Fuentes, whose daughter, Felicé, if she pleased, would pour for a man the mildest of *pulque*, the best of aguardiente! José was known to be smitten of the charms of little Felicé.

Against the adobe wall of the inn José was strumming a *tarantelle* on Felicé's mandolin, while the girl smiled. Brilar's head, poked around the corner, was José's first warning that the great Señor Jim was there to discover him loafing, when he should have been riding with the mail.

"José, be so kind as to water Brilar. These fellows may not breathe him enough before giving him the first sip. Felicé, some of your mildest

pulque. Ah, Señor Fuentes, permit me to compliment you on your health, and Felicé's beauty. Get me some of your brown cigarette wrappers." Easton tossed a coin to the proprietor of the inn.

All set about executing the great señor's easy errands, and Jim Easton saw that the mail bag was convenient on the peg before the door. Strangely, Jim, who never had stopped to spy, found himself impelled to search the bag. He found Frazer's business letters, Prime's friendly ones, missives which Prime had written for Mexican retainers, as usual, and then one that held his attention.

This was a letter whose upper left corner bore the imprint of a Chicago mail-order firm. Obviously the stamp had been pasted over one already used. The letter was addressed with the mail-order stencil: "B. J. Kingston, Tin Cow." Some one had used an old envelope, that had once been in Brazos Kingston's hands, to send him a missive without revealing the handwriting of the sender in the address! Jim put the letter into the pouch and tiptoed away.

José led Brilar back, well watered; Felicé came with the *pulque*, Fuentes with the brown wrappers. Brilar was tied; they talked. Siesta time came and went. Then Jim and José rode. Jim was most gracious and gave José some of his foil-wrapped cigarettes. José, sensible of being at fault, begged Jim, who perchance had expected it, not to say that he, José, had been loafing in the *jacal*. Jim agreed and thus made sure that José would not mention that Jim had been there. A most subtle Señor Jim, upon occasion.

In Tin Cow, Jim watched across the street, while the mail was given out. He smiled grimly, as Brazos Kingston and Hart Trantor came, soon after José had gone, to the wagon yard to put up his dainty stepping hoss, called Smoky. Jim managed:

to brush Brazos in the press about the mail window and heard him say to Trantor: "She writes meet her at Dead Hole, noon, to-morrow."

Then they went, without noticing Jim, who strolled abroad. "She?" Jim thought. What "she" at Bar Six would write that skunk?

Curiously enough his thought leaped to Kate Bradon. Well, what of it? She was foot-loose, able to look after herself. But why did she not meet Brazos at Circle Dot X, when she went over there with Vangie? Was that too public? "I pass this up," Jim decided, "but ought I put Big Augur on?"

Ought he to own up to Frazer that he had looked into the mail bag, spied about on Brazos, instead of meeting him eye to eye!

The whole day's work was so foreign to Jim's usual open ways that he felt guilty. He shook off the irritating thoughts and set about to hire, or inquire after, two new hands for Bar Six. He sent word to two who seemed likely to come. Then he and José rode for home.

As they came clattering up to the ranch-house garden, Jim noted that Frazer, booted, spurred, having on a fine silk shirt and bright tie, was there; not a bad figure of a man, chewing a cigar absently, a light of interest in his eyes that had not been in them for weeks.

There was a staccato of firm heels on the hall floor inside. Easton glanced casually at Little Augur, who by now had possessed herself of a letter from José's bag. José, being thanked, saluted them all and went, humming gayly.

As Kate Bradon stepped lightly through the portal, Jim saw Little Augur look over the top of her letter, then down again quickly. Frazer was eager to note Kate's entrance and whipped from his hip pocket a soft gray silk neckerchief, knotting it care-

lessly, so that it hung down his shoulders behind, a bit of extra toggery that he had not worn since the death of his wife.

Turning to Easton he said steadily, if with a trace of restraint: "Jim, have a boy make ready Thunder for Missus Bradon's use."

He stopped awkwardly, as Jim turned to call the order, then: "Have my own Tom Tucker out. I'm ridin', too."

Easton's glance caught the intent look of Little Augur at the back of Kate Bradon—not a friendly glance! Kate and Frazer chatted with Jim a moment.

Soon Tom Tucker and Thunder came dancing in, each led by a smiling lad. Tom, a chestnut stallion, was especially happy. He had hardly been ridden for weeks. Kate put out a hand to the stallion's nose. The horse snorted and drew back.

"Be shy, there," Jim said. "Tom's not friendly with strangers."

"Missus Bradon's not a stranger here," Frazer replied in reproof.

Tides of feeling surged under Jim's tan at this first word of personal criticism ever cast at him. He expected criticisms of work from men and employer, but this searing, stinging lash of voice was something new.

Little Augur had heard and signaled that she was sorry. That made Jim the more angry, but he kept his temper down. "Served me right for offering a word out of line of duty," he told himself. "If Ed wants Kate to get chewed by Tucker, let her!"

She reached again, with a slow smile at Jim, and touched Tom's velvety nose. The horse bared his teeth and jerked the Mexican lad's thin arm straight, as his teeth came down the daring woman's forearm.

Easton, expecting such results from her folly, shot

his clenched fist up into the hollow between Tom's jaw bones and neck. The blow, jarring the horse mightily, caused his jaws to relax before he could bite, full power. Kate suffered no injury, but her face flashed to open anger. Her quirt on her wrist flicked up, as she shifted it to her strong hand. Tom, dancing at the bridle's end, snorted spitefully. Easton caught Kate's arm, with the uplifted quirt ready in her hand to strike, and drew it down with steady pressure, holding her eyes. Frazer started for Tom.

"Tom Tucker, he won't stand being quirted by any one afoot," Jim drawled, as he got the woman's arm down.

Kate relaxed, then laughed. "I apologize to you-all, specially to Tom Tucker."

Then, before they could offer a hand, she had vaulted into Thunder's saddle easily and was smiling down at them. She had on a neat-fitting brown-cord riding suit and a wide-brimmed hat, caught up at one side with a single white plume. With her color softened from being so much indoors Kate Bradon was a handsome woman, and her eyes showed latent glints of greenish fire, as she felt the approving gaze of Ed Frazer on her. She tightened on the bridle reins, and Thunder began to back and side-step uneasily. Prime spoke up quickly.

"Mrs. Bradon, Thunder is tender on the bit. Don't jerk on his mouth so, please."

A slow smile went over the woman's face. Then she clinched in with her knees, made sure her hold, and deliberately yanked on the bit. Thunder, unused to this treatment, started to back again. The quirt came down, and then Thunder was a swirling, gyrating form in a cloud of dust. The woman rode him firmly, letting the quirt fall in time to Thunder's leaps. Her seat was perfect. Easton glanced

aside at Little Augur, who had started erect. At every cut of the quirt on Thunder's hide Prime shrank and shivered.

Frazer, eyes only for Kate Bradon, did not notice Prime's agitation. Easton, through the girl, felt the welts that the woman laid upon Thunder's smooth hide.

Suddenly Kate Bradon ceased to jam the bit back into the horse's throat and let her quirt fall idle. Thunder steadied at once, flanks heaving, nostrils quivering in agony. Sweat was starting from him. Kate Bradon laughed.

"I thought I'd let him know who was boss—first off," she said in explanation to Frazer, conscious that he was admiring her.

"Best way," he replied approvingly, "but I never saw old Thunder behave thataway. Yo're sure one hard-ridin' woman, Missus Bradon."

He touched Tom Tucker. The stallion whirled and was off. Kate Bradon cast one look behind at Little Augur. It was a look in which was victory. Then she cut Thunder lightly and was gone, overtaking Frazer at the lower turn of the trail leading to the main trail.

CHAPTER V

AND WOMAN ACCEPTS

RIDING alongside Kate, who soon overtook him, Ed Frazer thought how good it was to ride again under the warm sun, to be wrapped in sweet, pure air, to live again after his midnight of grief. This woman beside him—this handsome, superb creature—had given him something to hope for.

Kate felt the urge of his mood. Purposely she turned the talk aside into business and offered him good advice on some phases of ranch work. Never had she revealed that practical outdoor side of herself to him and now she did fully. Frazer was captivated. Kate remained cool, businesslike, but provocative.

First they rode to Circle Dot X, for she had made the excuse that she wanted to go there. Pappy Yeagers, wagging his senile jaw, looked with interest at Frazer. "Gittin' peart ag'in, Ed?"

"Maybe I am," replied Frazer, his eyes on Kate tripping capably about.

Pappy grinned wisely, but he made one mistake. Getting Kate's eye, he said: "I need help to-morrow. I'll stop Brazos——"

She wheeled on him. "Tell Brazos to keep away from here. Bar Six does my work now."

Pappy Yeager blinked and was puzzled.

Then the two riders left, turning north, for Kate had proposed a ride to Dead Hole. From there they could turn due west, across a tableland almost five miles square, standing, on an average, two hundred feet above the general level of the rolling range land. In popular parlance it was referred to as Low Mesa.

It was not a part of Bar Six holdings proper, yet custom had left it to Bar Six for fattening trail herds, as it was near the home base of Bar Six and often caught local rains that missed other parts of the country near by.

The sun was lowering, and purple half lights deepened northward, where the Lost Cañon's range lifted pallid shoulders. The scent of bruised leaves mounted like incense up to their gratified nostrils.

"Fine to be alive and out with you," Frazer said, as they made swiftly past the fork, where the trail split to Powder Creek, Brazos' home grounds.

Just then came a dry, rustling whirring from under a rabbit weed. Both horses shied. Kate, getting Thunder beside Tucker in a flash, snapped Frazer's six-gun from its holster and, before he could locate the wedge-shaped head above the mottled coils, Kate whirled down with the gun, cutting the rattler to ribbons. She tossed Ed Frazer the gun.

"Yo' sure c'n throw a six," he praised, holstering it.

"Race you now," she said, giving Thunder rein, and they were away.

Tom Tucker easily caught Thunder. Her mood changed to quietness, and they jogged, she giving him easy womanly banter, he yearning to speak out, to say warm phrases.

"Why not?" he found himself thinking. "She's handsome, plucky, and a good woman, or report would have made the contrary known."

Vangie had been born when Kate was a girl wife; Vangie was still young. Kate was under forty; she did not appear thirty.

They swept up the trail, side by side, to the brink of Dead Hole, a great gash in the earth's bosom, north and south, perhaps a mile wide there. The rocky rim shelved away thinly, right where the

forefeet of the horses were, as they snorted into immensity side by side.

Below was an expanse of jagged rocks, with cactus and greasewood between, and in the center of the depression was a circle of white, inside of which was the pool of bad water that had left its deposit about its shores. The view was splendid, and the ride a favorite one for Prime.

Frazer swung down and let Tom's reins drop. The stallion edged back from the brink and went to cropping grammar grass. Kate Bradon flicked down and let Thunder's reins drop, and he, too, began to eat. Kate walked to the verge and stood erect, her hand behind her, gazing off toward the outer spaces. Frazer, at her side, was rehearsing what he had to say, rehearsing it carefully, hoping to guide the talk in such a way that he would secure an opening for his carefully composed phrases.

A baby wind puffed a tendril of her hair across his face, as he leaned toward her—just a tendril of her hair. He let it rest there, against his cheek, and was silent. She did not move. He took off his right glove and dropped it at his side. She did not move. He took that tendril of soft hair and pushed it aside and felt it glide through his fingers.

His arm went about her shoulders, swiftly, firmly, almost roughly. "Kate, Kate!" he exclaimed in his simple loyalty.

"What is this, Mr. Frazer," she said, drawing away, yet not too insistent upon her coyness.

"Kate, oh, Kate!" His lips formed for a kiss, and he drew her face toward him.

She pushed away and stood a step from him, her face aflame. "What do you mean, Mr. Frazer?"

"Mean! Why——"

"I am a lone widow woman. I am not a light woman, to be kissed and snuggled up to this way."

"Kate, I meant no disrespect. I am in earnest. I want you to be——"

"Be what?" Her voice was soft, although her manner was so unyielding.

"I know it's a short time since I was made a widower, but I'm a quick-actin' man in business, Kate." Again he reached out his hands toward her, and again she moved a bit away.

"In business?" There was a hint of mockery in her tones. "What are you drivin' at, Ed Frazer?" she asked, with a slight smile of invitation.

"Yes, in business, Kate. I want a pa'tner—a pa'tner ag'in."

"Partner?"

"Yes, Kate. When Mellie died I thought the world was tu'ned to ashes, and I with it. But I see that there's still work to be done. My hands got to be kept goin' and old Bar Six making round-ups in due seasons. Prime, she needs some one over her. I want a pa'tner, Kate. I can't give any fond love, like a young man, and you are past those foolish ideas of romance. But together we two could make a quiet, easy match of it. Oh, Kate, will you be my wife?"

The slow, easy smile of complete triumph, that she had to let shine on her face, he took for consent, and he drew her to his arms, and her lips were held prize by his own.

"I've won then, and it was easier than I had thought," she found herself thinking, under the stormy beat of his kisses. "Now let them talk! What do I care for what folks say, or for what Brazos may think. I'll have all Bar Six at my back, and, at my word, he can be driven out or put under."

Through the tumbling phrases of the wooer she heard the whicker of one of their horses. The other

joined. Above, below, the trail turned sharply. No one was in sight yet. With a lilt of laughter that concealed her anxiety, she gave Frazer one swift, but eager, kiss that told him what his heart yearned to know.

Then she pushed away, and, when the newcomer rounded the trail above, they were apparently just gazing out over the Hole. He rode close to the giant's wall, swung out from the edge, as the wall swung out, then rounded its end, and she saw that it was Brazos Kingston.

As Kate's eye crept down from the newcomer, who had not yet seen them, to Frazer's waist, she saw how quickly his hand swept over to the butt of his gun, while his eyes were fixed upon the advancing rider.

Brazos started, was on the alert, and his keen glance took in the assured attitude of Frazer. He never varied the gait of his horse, never ceased to sway and loll in the saddle. A surly nod he gave, including them both, and then he had rounded the lower turn, and they could hear the hoofs of his horse, making play among the loose stone on the slope.

Frazer, with a little laugh of scorn, remarked: "He didn't dare raise his eyes."

"He saw where your hand was," she replied, laying her own over it.

Frazer started and took her hand in his own, raised it to his lips and kissed it.

"You foolish boy," she said, the tides mounting high on her firm cheeks.

"Kate, we should wait a while before marrying. I owe it to her." His hand pointed above.

"Yes, Ed"—using his name for the first time so freely—"yes, it will be better. If you don't wish it, we don't have to tell folks yet."

She noticed how he breathed with relief, for she knew that he was thinking of Prime then and, good, easy man that he was in such matters, only hoping for the easiest way out of it. In the open he would have been for hard riding, hard shooting, hard efforts, always advancing. But in this mesh of affairs of the heart he was inclined to wriggle a bit. The very stern masculinity of him made him shy over feminine matters. Kate had calculated upon that to the last grain and scruple.

"We might let it go between ourselves, Kate, for the present. You can stay on as housekeeper. If there's anything you need to make yore work lighter, let me know. Only keep old Bar Six clean, the men well fed, servants on their job. See that ol' 'Molly Polly,' the cow hands' cook, has plenty good supplies. Feed 'em!"

They rode home sedately enough, through the tranquil dusk, and the evening star shone warm and low, as they came to the big house again. Prime had gone for a lope; Easton, the servants said, had left word that he had ridden off to stand as godfather to a Mexican boy, whose father once had been on Bar Six, but now had a little ranch of his own, some twenty miles off to the south. Luga Garcia and his good wife wished the foreman to be sponsor for their newest boy, and so Jim had gone, for he knew the joys and sorrows of his Mexican friends, and they repaid his understanding with pure affection.

So the two had their evening meal together and a quiet hour, which Kate Bradon used to bind fast her captive. From his trinket box he got a plain ring and put it on her finger as a sign of their engagement. Then Kate excused herself and left him under the gallery, with the friendly stars shining down

on the tinkling fountain's sparkling spray, that seemed to hold them gemmed in its midst.

Presently Frazer heard a horse come in below, then Prime's footsteps. She came under the gallery eagerly, for she had seen some one in his chair, and she had been hoping to find him alone. She drew up a low stool and put an arm around him and patted the hand he held on the arm of his chair. He felt a rush of soft feeling for this handsome, strong, capable daughter of his, who, though she could ride and rope and shoot, had all the accomplishments of her Eastern sisters. He leaned his check over against her own and rubbed it. She cuddled to him quietly, and after a time she said: "Big Augur, isn't it about time I began to take the reins indoors."

"Why"—rubbing slowly at his big head—"why worry? Missus Bradon, she seems able to keep her hand on things."

"But you said——"

"A man, he says lots o' things, Prime, girl." Then he tried to laugh it all off.

A long, long silence followed, hardly broken by the cadenced fall of silvered water into silvered water. Prime suddenly threw her arms about him and stormed. "Oh, dad, don't you ever think of getting another woman to fill mother's place. Oh, dad, promise me not to. I'll do all I can to make it honey for you, only let me try——"

"There, there," he replied, patting the hair that caught a glint of the stars reflected in the gurgling fountain. "What made you think of that?"

"I don't know, Big Augur—I don't know."

She waited in his arms for him to promise, but he held her and only would say, over and over, as he patted her head: "There, there, girl."

CHAPTER VI

A COMPACT WITH DEATH

HURRY up, Prime, and get Vangie. Let's ride over to the west pasture," said Frazer, who called all the open range west, outside Bar Six holdings proper. "I want to look over the calf crop. I can't let that slab-sided Easton rise up an' take credit for running Bar Six entire."

It was the morning after his engagement to Kate, and Frazer was in high spirits. He had on his well-worn range togs. Fortified with a bag of grub he yelled for Tucker, good-naturedly squeezed Vangie's cheeks till her gum popped out, and gave her a new stick from his own store, slapped Prime on the shoulders and called her "Old Hoss," as of yore.

Jim grinned widely to see Ed himself again, little suspecting that Kate, whispering slyly to Vangie, could give him the clew. Prime was too pleased over Frazer's good humor to notice many things, especially so when the horses came up and she found that Frazer had had "Bucky," a handsome fawn-colored stallion, set apart for her.

"He's yo'rn, entire," Frazer told her. "Does he make up for Thunder being taken?"

Prime smiled happily and thanked him. She liked Vangie, was glad to have the girl along. Soon they were off, going up along the edge of the garden, striking away west.

Why had Frazer started on this trip? He could not have told. But Kate could have given him the hint! It arose out a sentence of Frazer's the night before: "Kate, I wonder if Prime oughtn't to take hold indoors more?"

The question had alarmed Kate, as it seemed to point to a drawing together of father and daughter. So, before the others were astir that day, Kate managed to get Frazer aside and, by insinuations, made him believe he owed it to Prime to ride out more with her, make much of her, to prepare her for the announcement of his engagement to Kate.

Kate went indoors, well satisfied. She knew where Frazer, Prime, and Vangie would be all day. The hands, with Jim to head them, would be at the South Springs, repairing fences around drinking holes, lately broken into and fouled by horses in stampede.

So the brainy, scheming woman figured that she had a day to herself, and she needed it, for to-day she had promised to meet Brazos.

She did not wear the white-plumed hat this day, for it would have marked her afar. She started off with it, but in a pocket of her skirt she had a soft hat. When well away from the ranch she put this one on, after dropping the plumed hat lightly in between two rocks, off the trail a bit, and covering it with grass. At her own ranch she changed horses, leaving Thunder with Pappy Yeagers and taking one of her own staid mounts from the corral. Now there would be little to identify her, if she were seen by some one from afar. She did not expect to meet any one, except Bar Six folks, on the trail she was to ride to Dead Hole, and they were about all accounted for.

Where the dim track, that led off to Brazos' place, made into the Dead Hole trail, she read the sign with practiced eye. One fresh track came out and turned north! She smiled. Brazos, anxious, had not been able to wait till the hour of meeting. He had ridden, like an impatient boy, to the place

designated. That alone told the woman of her power over the man.

She let the cayuse loiter, to keep the man waiting the longer. She took time to eat her lunch, as she lolled in the saddle, and it tasted good to her. After she had finished eating, she saw Brazos, up along where was the Giant's Wall.

Brazos was sitting against a rock, his face turned down the trail, that he might catch the first glimpse of her, as she turned the corner. She smiled a bit to herself thus to find the grown man so eager. Her mood was one for mischief and tantalizing guile. But Brazos' brow was dark, as he snapped erect.

"Came at last, eh, after keepin' me waitin' like a kid!" he said.

Her full eyes made his fall before she answered. She got down easily, and the horse turned aside to graze. Then she asked: "What do you mean? I didn't have to come at all."

She sat down where he had been, and he lounged before her, stretched out on one side, his left elbow supporting him. Her back was against the rock. The horses nipped, neighborly fashion, for they were friends.

"I'd like to know," Brazos asked, without preamble, "if you've made any tracks toward putting our scheme through at Bar Six?"

"Yes," she replied, meeting his gaze levelly.

"Takes a long, long time to let me know—an' me outside, not able to see you an' wanting you, Kate." He leaned toward her eagerly.

She put out her hand, and her face was unyielding. "See here, Brazos, we made a bargain. I was to do certain things, and you others."

"All I'm 'lowed to do is to wait, like a kid."

His voice went up, as he gathered his forces for a quarrel.

"Brazos, listen! It'll take time. A woman can't go in an' do all we want done in a few weeks."

"Not a few weeks now."

"A few more or less doesn't matter. It's the long pull that counts in this game. You've played little games, but this is big——"

She saw that she had, perhaps, overstated her case, for he flashed back at her:

"How big?" he asked sneeringly.

She bent close toward him and whispered into his ear: "Bar Six!"

"What do you mean?" Blank astonishment was written on his face.

"Mean? What I've said, Brazos. Play the game my way, and we win Bar Six."

"Win it?"

"Own it entire."

He relaxed and studied her tense face. His lip lifted and the white tooth shone there, sinister, wolfishly. "Shoot!"

"I've found, Brazos, that Ed Frazer is easy to handle."

"Most men would be, with yo' handlin' an' gentlin' them." Shortly, abruptly, the words spurted from his tight lips.

"Brazos," she said, with a full-voiced slowness, "he wants me."

"Wants you? So do a lot o' men," he replied. "I'm one."

"Brazos," leaning till her hand was on his knee, "he wants to marry me."

"He won't," he declared, his hand leaping to his gun. "He won't, and if I thought he would, you'd not go back to Bar Six again." A storm of

passion shook the masculine toy she played with so deftly, and he snarled inarticulately.

She met his rage coolly. "Think a minute, Brazos. A little calculating, a little waiting and then luxury, a big herd, one of the biggest ranches in the Southwest."

"But how?" He steadied himself and took his hand from the gun.

"How, you ask? By playing a man's game and a woman's game. Suppose I marry Frazer?"

"No, never!"

"Just suppose it," she said, and he bit back the new phrase of denial which his lips wanted to utter, and she knew she had won a point.

"Well, then, shoot again."

"As his wife I'd sure land you as Bar Six foreman."

"And after that?"

"Accidents happen. Frazer rides with his hands at round-up. You'd lay out the work, and you could get Trantor back at Bar Six. He's a sure-fire gunman. So are you. Do I have to bat you on th' head, Brazos, with a will made out like I want him to make it?"

"No, but how am I to know which of us yo're playin' square with?"

"Which one? Oh, Brazos!" Her hand clasped his wrist reassuringly.

"Well, then, yo' never give me a kiss, a promise, right out."

She leaned forward, her eyes aflame, her pursed lips the snare to take his will captive. Their lips met, and he crushed her to him. His voice came brokenly. "I'd go through fire to my hocks for you, Kate. But it's hard, it's hard to ask what you ask of me."

"Never mind, Brazos. A little waiting, more or

less, a little planning, and then yo're a man, Brazos, not a tow-head imitation like Frazer that's feared because he's riders at his back and Jim Easton's gun to talk for him. You stand alone."

"Yes, and if folks know what I do up Lost Cañon way, and what it's beginning to pay me——" He caught himself from full avowal, but she persisted.

"What is it, Brazos? I've never went deep into yore affairs, but I got a right, now."

"Yes, Kate. People think there is no way into Lost Cañon for cattle or hosses, so they've kept away. But I've found a way, an old Indian trail. I've got——"

He leaned forward to whisper. She was eager to hear:

"I've got a thousand head in there, all sorts. A man like me without capital can't swing a deal on them without being shaved all 'long th' line by crooked lawyers and brand inspectors and such. But once let me get hooked to Bar Six, and I can work them off under cover of Bar Six reputation. They came from away up north. Brands been worked over, ear notches doctored. I been playing a lone game for a few years."

"But how did you pay for them all?"

"Rustlers don't ask much a head. I've traded for some, got some myself—got them, you un'stand?"

She nodded her head.

"I've gone without, bached it, lived mean an' close, but I been saving up, not dollars, but cattle. I hoped to let them increase an' take the calves and brand them. But they'd make my cattle increase too fast to look right. I had an idea of getting land away off somewhere an' drivin' my cattle to it, but I'd have had to take too many into

th' secret. Now I got only Trantor and that young fool, Trescott."

"He's a likely boy, Brazos."

"Yes, but he has scrupulous ideas at times. He followed Trantor out o' romance an' braggadocio. Mebbe he'll stay put."

"So you see, Brazos," Kate said, bringing him back to the point, "you want just what I want—control of Bar Six."

"Yes, but I don't want you Ed Frazer's wife—no, not none."

There was a stubborn ring to his voice. She had studied the man too thoroughly not to sense that his opposition was deep-rooted.

"Then let it rest a while, Brazos. Nothing is settled there. I may find a way to get you on as foreman without marrying Frazer."

"Yo're clever 'nuff, Kate," he replied admiringly, placated now. "And, say, Kate, I'm sort of short of ready cash. Can you lend me some, a few hundred? Able to?"

"I may be," she said, getting up suddenly. "I've got to go back now. I've got to ride back by way of my place." This demand had shown her a new side to the relations she might have to sustain with this determined wooer.

She gave him a light kiss and sprang into the saddle. He watched her ride away, and when the turn of the trail hid her, he sat down again, moody and at a loss. He tossed stone after stone into the depths of the Hole, hearkening to their fall. Of a sudden his face darkened, and his hand sought the butt of his gun, but then it came away, and he let his face relax. After a time he, too, slowly rode down the trail.

Kate Bradon made into her own side trail at mid-afternoon. She changed horses and rode for

Bar Six. On the way she retrieved her white-plumed hat, and Thunder loped briskly, being hungry for exercise after being shut in the little Circle Dot X corral all day.

The scene with Brazos had simplified her problem, she thought. She had found out that Brazos might not tolerate her being married to Frazer. She had hoped that he would fall in easily with her plans, and that thus she might be able to utilize Brazos in building up her influence on Bar Six until such time as she could find means to get rid of him.

The man's stubborn insistence irritated her, particularly as she had thought she knew all the man's ideas toward herself. Now she saw she must choose between the two men. On the one hand Frazer and Bar Six; on the other Brazos, with his herd of rustled cattle and the uncertain chances of becoming an outlaw's wife.

Of course, if Brazos won through on his crooked deals, they would have a goodly sum, but then it would not be what the mistress of Bar Six would have, nor would the standing among folk who counted go with it. It would not bring her trips East and soft living.

In her mind there was formed a compact with death. One of them must die!

Kate Bradon's full lips came together, and her face grew hard. With the strong arm of the survivor at her service, she would be mistress of Bar Six! All those subtly soft lines, with which she had cozened two men in two days, were gone. The mask that took their place was that of a woman of indomitable purpose and will to succeed, at whatever cost. Then she wiped away the lines of determination with an effort. When she let Thunder canter up the little rise to dis-

mount before the door of the big house, she was smiling, as Frazer and Vangie came out to meet her and tell her of the incidents of the fine day they had had in the open. Prime was indoors, dressing for the evening.

"I had to jog down to my place and put Pappy Yeagers over the jumps again," she informed Frazer, who came toward her eagerly.

"Better move him up here an' let him chore 'round. Circle Dot X can run wild. It takes up too much of your valuable time, Missus Bradon," he said, though his tongue ached to call her Kate.

She laughed away the suggestion and his proffer of assistance, as she went indoors quickly to make ready to preside over the coming meal.

Despite her dismissal of Frazer's idea, his words had given her food for serious thought. They had brought up the possibilities of the little place in fitting her plans together.

Brazos wanted some ready money. She might need some herself. She had some money, as a balance on her wages due from Frazer, but she could foresee the need for using other sums. She wanted money for dress, Brazos had to be kept in line, and there were possible messengers to bribe. Circle Dot X was small in her life now; Bar Six was the big thing.

Cash money, actual cash, was scarce with her, always had been. She had had her yearly sums of cash from her sales of stock; these had gone for clothing, supplies, harness and in wages to Pappy, who had of course spent them in Tin Cow. They never had lacked for food, shelter, rough and ready wearables, but real cash never had been abundant. She felt the need for it now, and the need brought to her mind a keen resolve, that found expression after they had eaten and were

under the gallery—Frazer in his big easy-chair across the table from her, Prime and Vangie above, exchanging banter with Easton.

"I've been thinking about Circle Dot X again," she said by way of an opening.

"Second thoughts bring you to see it's in the way?"

"I think I'll sell, if I can find a buyer."

"Mean that?" quickly.

"Yes. Of course the buildings aren't much, but I've got some water that is unfailing and a man with a small family could work the place, throw in chores with you here for favors and make it O. K., like I have."

"Oh, maw," Vangie cut in plaintively, "don't sell Circle Dot X."

"You be still, Vangie," she said firmly.

"Dad, let me buy it," Prime spoke up.

"You?" Frazer asked in astonishment.

"Yes, I've got my own pocket money that I've saved, banked with your own. How much do you want for the place, Mrs. Bradon?"

Frazer began to laugh teasingly, shaking one big fist at Prime threateningly. "Want to set up as rival to Big Augur, right under his nose, eh?"

"Yes, dad. I can't tell just why, but I want to own some land of my own. I've learned the cow business, and I'll need to know all I can of it later, for I'm a cow woman, just as you're a cowman, dad."

"She said something then," Easton remarked. "She's a hand."

"There, you see, dad? Jim backs me up. Mrs. Bradon, how much will you take for Circle Dot X?"

"Two thousand dollars for land, water, and buildings. I keep the cattle and have possession until the fall round-up comes down here; then my stuff

can be bought by you, as found on the round-up, or I can sell it elsewhere."

"It's a good buy, Prime, but I'd rather have it added to Bar Six," Frazer replied, yet he was smiling and on the point of yielding to her notion.

"I'll take it. Dad, draw us a paper, and I'll give Mrs. Bradon a binder payment now. You see, I'm all for business."

Vangie dabbed a tear or two from her eyes, but when the binder was paid, and her mother tossed her a small bill, Vangie dried her tears and held the money up and blew it into the air, as if it were a leaf.

"Light as a tumbleweed, an' it'll go as fast when I get hold of pen and ink and paper and that cow-puncher's dictionary." Vangie was referring to the mail-order-house catalogue she had been studying.

And so it was settled.

CHAPTER VII

HEART TIES REKNIT

PRIME'S idea of owning Circle Dot X had given Frazer much food for self-examination. He had taken Prime's usefulness as a matter of course. Now she had a notion for land of her own. He thought guiltily of how he had withdrawn from Prime's company for secret hours with Kate. The legal details of buying Circle Dot X gave him an excuse for riding to Willow Springs with Prime to record the papers and get Kate's purchase-price cash. It would be a two-day trip, with one night camp on the road.

"If I don't go to the Springs now, they'll rig it up so I'll be boss of the Stranglers again. I want to saw that onto Pete Brennan this year. I ought to talk round-up plans with the old hellions, too," Ed decided.

Kate saw them go with secret fear, sensing what the trip might mean if Prime were alive to her peril. Easton saw them go, too, with secret qualms, for Vangie kept Jim busy dodging.

In Willow Springs, Frazer had blown away the last of his brooding sorrow over the loss of his wife. Not that his heart did not yearn for her, but, in place of the paralyzing grief, that had made Prime fear for her father's very reason in the first days of his trial, came a gentle, quiet sense of absence. This the loyal girl sensed was the forerunner of a return to steady activity and content with the business of everyday life.

Frazer found that the Deloss County Cattlemen's Association had been very busy. In his absence, the members had forgathered and had almost

reached the point of forcing Frazer into the presidency again, which would mean that he was to lead the Strangers. But Frazer soon shared all the secrets of the affairs of the big men of the region, and, by clever electioneering, in which Prime joined, managed to get his friendly rival, Pete Brennan, a stocky, very bow-legged and fast-shooting ex-Texan, pegged down and hitched with the job.

Leaving Prime with friends in town, Frazer went out and celebrated this victory, and then the plans for the spring round-up were gone over, and Easton was elected foreman of it, as a counterpoise to Brennan's new honors.

Early next morning the big men and their retainers rode out of Willow Springs, and that place sank into dim apathy again. Frazer, bethinking himself of Prime's paper, had it recorded, and they rode toward home.

Prime's hands were folded gently onto the horn of the saddle. A wisp of her brown hair was on her cheek, and her long lashes swept up and down regularly, for her gaze was not upon things close at hand, hardly on things distant.

When their camp fire was embers that night, Prime sang for her father. With the faint glow of the fire heightening her beauty she lifted up her lovely contralto in verses of "The Loco Puncher's Lament:"

"I'm tired o' seein' cattle; I want t' go back East
An' hear folks yawp an' prattle about things I like least.
Oh, ya-es I do; ya-es I surely do;
Because I'm crazy;
My mind is hazy.
Yea, bo, now ain't that true?"

"Prickly chollas! They'd never get you East, Prime, girl," Frazer said admiringly. "You'd take one o' them Eastern dudes an' bend a gun on him."

The dew of her love was on his cheek, as he turned to rake the fire together for the night. All the way home the girl won upon him. Away from Kate his conscience pricked him. He determined to give his daughter more of his time and heart. So they rode into Bar Six, so happy that their mood forced itself upon the attention of watchful Kate. She did not err, but shrewdly bided her time, instead of forcing herself upon the newly aroused man at once.

Instead, Kate devoted herself to Prime, making much of her. In this way she took the surest road to regain all her influence over Frazer. Prime, strengthened in her belief in her father's affection for her, was deceived by the quick-witted woman's attentions to her.

Prime had looked forward to having Kate Bradon make much of Frazer after their absence, but when the woman rather left Frazer aside and did all she could to make her own home-coming warm and hearty, Prime was lulled to a sense of security. As for Frazer, this sudden warmth of Kate's toward Prime pleased him, for it seemed to indicate that, when he made known to Prime his intentions toward Kate Bradon, Prime would not be averse to them.

Remarks that Frazer made the next day showed Kate Bradon plainly that the girl had taken almost her old place in the cattle king's life, and the woman sensed that she must work slowly and carefully. She also came to feel that her half-formed plans for going ahead with her campaign to bring Frazer to the point of marriage must wait, and that meant that, in the meanwhile, she must keep Brazos in leash and satisfied.

Making the excuse next day that she wished to visit Circle Dot X again to see what she wished

to move from it in the way of personal belongings, Frazer having offered her storage room for anything she wished to keep apart, she rode Thunder down. Vangie, intent upon Jim, did not offer to accompany her, and Frazer thought it best not to ride too often with her then. Prime and Frazer went together to scout for calves north of Bar Six.

Leaving Thunder at Circle Dot X, Kate Bradon rode for Brazos' meeting place, the edge of Dead Hole. He was there, and he was glad enough to see her. She gave him three hundred dollars in bills and told him how she had got the money. He laughed harshly.

"Well, Circle Dot X isn't nothin' 'longside Bar Six. When we own Bar Six, Kate, that li'l' Circle Dot X will be ours soon 'nuff. We'll find means."

"Then you've thought over my marryin' Frazer?" she asked eagerly.

"Yes; let's go where the money's thickest."

Kate gave him a light caress at that. He returned it with rough force. After arranging to either see him at Dead Hole, every little while, or leave or have left a note in a hole in the Giant's Wall, if she needed him, they parted, he morose, she very thoughtful.

"I'll balance them against each other," declared Kate to herself. "Brazos, in the background, can be used any time to rid me of Frazer, when I get a will to suit me. If Brazos balks, I can get Frazer to have him strangled for cattle lifting. Lost Cañon's secret is my hold on Brazos. He'll be good, only I've got to give him money to carry on his plans. But what are a few hundred dollars against Bar Six?"

CHAPTER VIII

VANGIE LEARNS SOMETHING

LEAVING the hands at work at the Springs next day, Jim Easton rode north and passed the big house a few miles to the west. He had two objects in so doing. First he wanted to prospect some dry draws and broken country, for those timid or erratic cows that will hide in odd corners with their calves, long after the usual time for edging out into the open. He wanted to be able to clean up such details before acting as round-up foreman.

Again, he wanted to be away from the possibility of being talked to by Vangie, who, during Prime's absence with Frazer, had made Jim's life a weary burden.

Now, after scouring through the broken country and finding what it promised in the way of calf crop, Jim let Brilar edge out onto a shoulder of hillside, from which he could survey a wide expanse of territory. He shifted in the saddle, sat sidewise and rolled a comforting cigarette. He congratulated himself upon his perspicacity in thus selecting that day for calf scouting. He felt secure now from pursuit. Too late he spoke to Brilar. From below came a hail, and then Vangie was in plain sight. She had kept to the lower levels, sure that Jim would have to ride that way to get home, and now she had her reward.

"I dunno what we-all're goin' to do 'bout this," Jim said to all-wise Brilar, who had spied Vangie and now whickered to the pinto, that answered joyfully.

The girl's lower lip was protruding, as her pinto swung her up to his level. Her face was darkened

by an anger that evidently had been gathering force. Her hair, that once had been so stringy, she now wore in a not bad imitation of Prime's glorious coronet. Her waist was gray silk, and her split skirt and new wide-brimmed riding hat were in excellent taste. She had answered immediately to the new environment of Bar Six, and the new Vangie had little external resemblance to the raw, under-dressed girl who had run wild for so long at Circle Dot X. She had on a pair of Prime's riding boots of russet, and as she handled herself in the saddle with true range-bred grace, Vangie did not make a half-bad figure, as she rode up to Jim. Of course her wagging jaw was not in keeping, and her first remark jarred like a file on a rusty saw.

"Mr. Easton, I can't no way stand what those punchers say." She flicked her gloves off, and tucked them under her belt. Her hands were moistly perspiring.

Jim studied her face a moment, as she set her teeth firmly into her quid of gum. He saw that she was close to tears, and he dreaded them.

"Well, what did the people say?" he asked, plunging in so far that he would have to have it out. Jim was desperate.

Vangie twisted about in her saddle and set her jaw on the gum.

"Come, I can't hoss 'em like they deserve unless you tell."

"I more than half think you're makin' fun," she said, with a flare of spunk that reassured him completely for the present on the tear question; "but I'll go on. I came up quietly to where they're working this morning. I heard Pecos Honeyman say to 'Silent' Trip: 'That pinto's veterinary surgeon is missin' his job to-day.'"

"Well, I don't savvy that's a hangin' remark," Jim said dryly, reaching down for a leaf to chew on.

"Then Silent, he says: 'Jim ought to take pity on a gal that is so devoted to her hoss that no one but Bar Six's foreman can tell what ails it.'"

"Oh, did he?" asked Jim savagely. And yet Silent had been within bounds.

"Yes, Mr. Easton. I wouldn't eavesdrop no more, so I rode away."

"I would, too, Vangie. Now what do you suppose them punchers got such an idea in their fool heads for?"

"I don't rightly know, Mr. Easton."

"I'll have to speak to them 'bout it," he replied earnestly.

"Oh, I wouldn't," she replied, with inconsistent eagerness.

"But I gotta now. If we let them go on an' make words of gossip 'bout us two, Vangie, I declare before long some one will be saying things."

"What things?"

"They'll be saying that you been usin' that pinto hoss just to shine 'round me, and we can't never allow such things to be said, can we, Vangie? I'll bend a gun on Silent's head if he don't live up to his name." He glanced aside at her.

The girl's eyes were roving out over the levels beneath, and her lower lip was protruding again. A tear just brimmed in one of her eyes, but she blinked it away. "No, Jim," she replied faintly, "I suppose not."

"I'm goin' to be right out with you, Vangie," said Jim heartily. "Of course with some strange girl I'd be offish an' stiff. But, bein's we two are neighbors, why, I'll say a word I wouldn't to an outside woman."

"Yes?" asked Vangie faintly, perhaps with expectancy of faintest hope.

"Talk like that wouldn't hurt me none, Vangie, but it would harm you. You're a woman now, and I'll say it to your face, you're a pretty woman." He noted how the compliment pleased.

"But me," he continued with a crafty sigh, "I'm plumb homely!" Vangie stirred and denial flashed in her face. "Even if I was as handsome as some, I've a secret sorrow that makes me respect all women."

Her face showed sympathy that made him almost repent. She asked eagerly: "Tell me, Jim."

"You won't tell?"

"Not a chipper out o' me." She swung around to face him.

"Well, then," placing his right hand over his heart, as if to still its throbbing, "I'm in love."

"Oh, in love. Is that all? That oughtn't to be sorrowful."

"But it is"—his voice sank to basic earnestness—"when there's no chance of it being returned."

"Man's foolish to love thataway." She almost swallowed her gum with the gulp of emotion that ensued.

"Oh, I dunno. A man, he can't help it. I'll tell you what she's like."

"But where is she?"

"Omaha," he said, desperately calm.

"Way off out there?"

"Yes. She's a waitress in the Boston Restaurant, right by the cattle chutes. Went all in a heap when I saw her. Big baby-blue eyes, clouds of yellow hair, fluffy-ruffles dresses!" He paused to give this proper effect, then he went on: "But she's tied to her invalid mother. I gotta wait till she's gone—been waiting five years!"

Vangie uttered a little sob, leaning forward in the saddle. Jim, uneasy, glanced off on every hand, as if trying to discern a hole into which to crawl until the storm had passed. The sob ended in a queer, gurgling sound.

Jim raised his eyes slowly from the ground, where no adequate hole had been discerned, to the girl's face. It was blazing with anger.

"Jim Easton, I never thought you'd make up such an elaborate lie just for fun."

He had no words for her. The dumb anguish in her face and the droop of her usually swaggering shoulders touched the depths of Easton's sensitive nature. She was sweeping on in the impetuosity of her wrath.

"You think a girl don't know, you men, that are so free to fling your favors right an' left, while we must wait till spoken?"

Her red lip shot out, and her whole face was swept by a storm of inner feeling, painful for the big man to see. Her horse stamped, and she gentled him with a kind word, so at variance with her demeanor and tones toward him that Easton startled at this new proof of her many-sided character. Then she was pouting at him again, and the tears were not on her lids.

"I didn't tell you all those punchers said. They said 'nuff to show I've made a fool of myself, wearin' my heart on my sleeve for every chuckle-head on these ranges to read. Mebbe they thought I could hear and wanted me to hear. They say listeners never hear good of themselves. I stood that an' sneaked away. What they said cut, but I didn't expect you'd make up a lie and try to make a fool of me—worse than them."

"Vangie"—all raillery was gone from his voice, and it was kind and low and even pleading—"I

didn't understand, girl. I thought you were mebbe for flirting a bit, as you've done, and no harm has come of it. I thought you were out to tease me by egging on after me and making game, so the boys could have a chance to banter, and that it got a little beyond that, but you wasn't serious. I'm sorry I hurt your feelings like this."

"Flirtin' with you! I've flirted with triflin' punchers, yes. But yo're not a flirtin' man, Jim Easton."

"No, I'm not. I think a woman is too nice a being to be petted by everybody."

"That's just it, Jim Easton. Yo're different. Oh——" She was sobbing again, then the sunshine came to her face suddenly, and she smiled through her tears.

"How did I know for sure you was lyin' 'bout that girl in the restaurant?"

"How?" asked Jim, his slow, honest smile following the quick change in her face.

"Because some one closer than Omaha's got yore heart!"

His face paled, so sudden was the attack. He fought back even the suspicion that she might hint at the edge of his secret. Her face came over, closer and closer to his own, and she would not let his eyes drop, but held them to her own with the intensity of her purpose.

"Some one closer, closer, closer——"

Then, with a force that swept his forming phrases of denial aside, she exclaimed: "You love Prime Frazer!"

He did not stir, for she had driven home the knife to the hilt, and he knew his face shone with the truth of the matter.

"Think a girl don't know? Living alongside you two, month in and month out, and not know? She don't know, eh——"

"She never will," declared Easton firmly.

"No one knows. You've kept it even from yourself, Jim Easton. But I've seen it growin' on you these last weeks."

She was still. He heard something drop upon a dry leaf at the skirts of her saddle, and he looked at the branch of the shrub that was there upheld from the main stalk. The leaves were red, and another drop added to their sanguinary stain. In the swirl of deep feeling, Vangie had clenched her right hand until the nails had sunk into the palm. She noted the object of his regard and opened her hand and gazed at its wounds in wonder. Then she shut it and held it close to her breast. She took up the reins in her left hand, leaving the gloves still in her belt.

"You won't tell, Vangie?" he asked.

"No, Jim," she said, a slow smile coming to her face, "I won't tell—unless I think tellin' will do good."

Her mood shifted in a second from opposition to laughter, and he sensed that the lighter mood covered some greater depth of feeling.

"A nice pair of simpletons we'd be. Neither sending feelin's to the right place! You dasn't speak out about yours, an' mine are counted too cheap to keep tally with."

Then, serious again, she went on:

"You don't deserve bad luck, but I do. I've flirted with many of the boys on the ranges, keeping them dancin' an' moonin' 'round. Only with you and one other have I ever been in earnest."

She choked back a sob, then continued: "You an' that Carl Trescott were different."

Jim spoke quickly: "He's a nice boy, Vangie, but he went with Brazos and Trantor."

"I know if I'd held out my finger that he'd

stayed. He went because I was harsh on him. You thought it was because he was mad at you. He'd not noticed yore call-down if he hadn't been on edge over my mean ways with him."

"And now he'll go a bad route, I'm 'fraid."

"A bad route?" She was leaning toward him anxiously again.

"Yes, Vangie, for Brazos and Trantor are bad. Brazos is being watched. He's been able to live an' get an always bigger herd without work. Trantor is a gunman, an old friend of Brazos, brought up here for no good. And Carl—why he'll be the goat, if any evil is done that they need to swear off onto some one. What else would they take a boy like that with them for?"

"An' I sent him away! He said, if I didn't take him, he'd do something bad. I thought he was joking, just to scare me."

"You didn't do it all, Vangie," replied Jim kindly, leaning toward her now in his anxiety to ease her of that much grief.

He put out his hand to reassure her, and unconsciously touched her wounded palm. She started at the contact, and he saw that he had a crimson drop on the tip of his finger. He wiped it absently on the white edge of his blue neckerchief, as he stiffened in his saddle.

"I'll bring him back," she declared, "if it will please you, Jim Easton. Who's that in the mouth of that dry draw off there?"

Easton started to attention and watched the rider loafing along, a good two miles away. The clear air and sun showed the horse to be light in color.

"That's Prime on her new buckskin." Then he spurred Brilar slightly and bolted.

Vangie, on the pinto, followed. She raced beside him, as they ended their long, sliding plunge

down the slope and came safely on to the level, in a whirlpool of dust. She called over the rata-plan of the hoofs: "I'll keep mum, Jim Easton, an' I'll bring Carl back."

He rewarded her with a wide, pleasant smile, and then they raced across to overtake Prime, who did not stop until they were up with her.

"Didn't know you'd be ridin' this way to-day, Little Augur," Jim called, as Brilar nipped at Bucky.

"Oh, didn't you?" she asked languidly, not at all like her usual self. "Well, I didn't until I came."

She shifted something that was swung to her left shoulder by a slender strap. Easton saw then that she had powerful field glasses. Her eyes engaged his a moment. Then she put her firm chin into the air and hit Bucky a cut with her quirt.

Brilar accepted the challenge, and Vangie's pony followed. There was a scurrying of hoofs, as the pinto manfully tried to keep up with the other two. The pony was game, but lacked the speed. Soon Brilar and Bucky, abreast, were racing as for life. Jim sensed something unusual in Prime's mood and kept Brilar up with the swift Bucky. When the pony was dropped far in the rear, Prime suddenly reined in, and Bucky slid to a dust-raising stop. Brilar came to a halt beside him.

Prime's chin was up in the air now, but there was what Jim took for the light of mischief in her eyes, as she demanded: "Well, Jim, aren't you ashamed to be branding mavericks on Bar Six range, right where Little Augur can see it all?"

She tapped the case of field glasses significantly.

"I didn't mean to spy," she said, as his jaw dropped, and anger made his face glow with a deeper color than he had ever shown her before.

"I was looking for shy cows and calves, and you know these glasses are fine."

Easton choked down some words and then some others. Somehow the words he wanted to say were not those Prime should hear. The pinto, gamely legging it, came up. Prime searched Vangie's face shrewdly. She noted that one of the girl's hands was ungloved. It was being held down. Prime saw the wounds on the palm and knew them for nail prints. By now they were swollen and inflamed. Prime's eyes went up to the crimson spot on Jim's neckerchief. She twitched Bucky about till he was headed homeward and remarked to Vangie:

"I guess we'll have a quiet ride in, don't you think?"

"If you-all don't race my poor pinto off his fool feet," Vangie replied, with a ready smile.

Easton found the going too narrow for three abreast. He let Brilar lag behind, and the two young women talked much, as they jogged. Easton found little to say, and he was not invited to say much. As they reached the home trail, Vangie called, as she turned south: "I'm going to split wind down home to see if Pappy Yeager's been doin' as he ought. Be back before dark."

She was gone at a reckless pace, swaying in the saddle, her quirt whistling all about the pony's flanks, but not cutting his hide.

Prime gazed quizzically at Easton and began to laugh. "She'll make a nice boy if you bring her up right."

Big Jim gulped, and they sat in a silence that deepened and spread. Jim had to say something. "I've been talking with her this afternoon—a lot."

"Yes?" Prime was politely curious on the surface.

"About Carl Trescott—she's going to try to

influence him away from Brazos and Trantor. Her refusal sent him away, she said. The boy thinks the sun rises and sets for her alone."

Her quick, warm hand, freed of glove, came over to pat Easton on the cheek.

"Good old Jim! You're always thinking of others! Let's ride."

Prime and Jim rode up to the big house together. So absorbed were they in their thoughts that they hardly noticed that, as they came in between the garden and the gallery and dismounted, Ed Frazer and Kate Bradon drew apart and were embarrassed in their first phrases of greeting.

Almost immediately Frazer began to talk to Jim about a possible shipment of steers that he meant to send East. In other years Frazer had attended to the selling of his cattle himself, but this year he proposed that Jim do it.

He was not sure of the details of the marketing; his information from his agents was not complete; there was no hurry; he was just mentioning it so Jim could think it over. The shipping could be done after the calf round-up had swung down below Bar Six. There would be slack time then for some weeks. Easton felt that this was a mark of Frazer's confidence. To car, handle, go with, and sell a trainload of Bar Six heavies would mean a big sum of money changing hands in the process, and it was a proof of complete trust for Frazer thus to offer him the chance. That Kate Bradon was smiling aside, while Frazer was talking all this over, Easton did not know. Prime was inside, making ready for the evening by donning an especially nice dress and making up her hair elaborately. She felt in some way the call of Eve for additional pains in adornment.

CHAPTER IX

WHEN A GIRL WILLS

VANGIE BRADON had been near Brazos' place, but not in it, many times since he had established himself there. He was known not to encourage company. His taking of Trantor and Carl had been a cause for wonder to Vangie and others.

Vangie started the pinto and soon was on the little lope north. Without hesitation she took the dim trail to Brazos' place and the sun was not far up when she came to the low, sprawled buildings of the man whom so many looked at aslant. Her pinto's whicker was answered by an equine chorus, and Vangie found herself wondering if Brazos always had so many mounts in his corral.

Vangie hailed: "Ya-ho, Brazos!"

There was a long silence, and then Brazos came out. She swung down and came toward him, undismayed by his plainly frigid demeanor. His big frame all but blocked the door space, yet she could see forms moving inside.

"What do you want?" he asked.

"Seen anything of that strayin' line-back of ours?" Vangie seized upon any pretext to explain her presence.

"No, an' if she is strayed, Bar Six will fog her back."

"Well, mebbe." Sticking out her lip at him, she sucked it in sharply. Then she raised her voice and dropped her bait.

"If you see Trescott, tell him I want him to do me a favor, next time he's down to Tin Cow. I'll be ridin' to Bar Six South Springs to-morrow morning."

She heard a little scuffle inside, but Brazos nodded sharply, and she knew she was not welcome. So she thanked him and whirled away, smiling easily. Striking the main trail she rode for Bar Six, humming as she rode.

Brazos spun about as soon as Vangie had disappeared and slammed into the house, drawing the door to after him. He set the latch firmly, and then took time to look at what he knew he would see, from the sounds he had heard, after Vangie had spoken of Trescott.

Carl was in the far corner, very erect, very angry, with Trantor's gun jammed into his ribs. Trantor had the boy's gun under his foot.

"That heifer gone?" Trantor asked, his voice gratingly harsh.

"You bet! Carl some restless?"

"Was for goin' right out to her. After all she's cut him, he is ready to eat out of her hand again, without salt on what he eats."

"I'd like for to state," Carl put in, "that I don't like this hectorin' none."

"You threw in with us; now you want to quit. Well, you know too much to quit us."

"I ain't said I wanted to quit, Trant."

"You don't have to. I can say it for you, dead center."

"Yo'-all know I'm no blatter. Yo've tried hard enough to get me to give away on Bar Six an' tell some things, but no real man will tell another outfit about the one he's worked with. I ain't sayin' I'd quit yo'-all, but, if I did, I'd not let down on you two."

"Well, you ain't goin' to get the chance."

Brazos, who all this time had remained silently observant, made a peculiar sign to Trantor, who

alone saw it. Carl was looking doggedly at the open door.

"You stay right in here till I talk with Brazos," said Trantor, holstering his gun and kicking Carl's back to the boy's feet. Carl did not offer to pick up the gun then. Trantor turned his back contemptuously on Carl and went outside with Brazos. For a time their voices were to be heard in dispute. Then Brazos' voice mounted, and Carl heard:

"All right, Trant, keep him, if you think best. We got to play safe, especially just now."

Carl got and holstered his gun. At the noise his feet made on the floor in stepping for it Trantor flashed inside, ready to shoot. He laughed, as he noted that Carl did not try to get at his weapon.

"You've learned sense, eh? Well, no man can outdraw me. Remember that!"

"Jim Easton can."

"He never tried."

"Then you're plumb lucky."

"Yore love for Big Jim seems to have grown new horns."

"No, I don't hone for him none, but truth's truth."

"He did you dirt."

"That ain't hurt his shootin' none. I know a man, heap mean, that boasts he can outshoot every one."

Trantor laughed. "Got nerve with you, kid, to jab that into me. Well, let it pass. If you want to go see that heifer, go. I ain't got time to gentle yore feelings. But keep yore mouth shet on what don't concern you in especial."

"I ain't sayin' I'm goin' to see her or not. I'd rather not talk about her promiscuous. She's a good girl, if some gassy, an' I don't want no mouth over her."

Carl's voice was firm and manly on this point. Trantor did not like the boy's way of looking him squarely in the eyes then, and he dropped the subject after a growl or two. Brazos came in and, without a word to show that he was displeased because Trantor had gone against his orders to hold Carl safe, proposed that they get supper.

Carl did not remark that inconsistency in the schemer's conduct that always had been so consistently bad. He was thinking of going back to Bar Six, if he could, for Vangie's lure had been well spread, and the boy wanted to be where she was.

After supper, when Carl went out to the corrals, Brazos rummaged in the boy's bag and showed to Trantor and then hid a silk neckerchief that Carl often wore at dances and frolics. He stuffed the silken gaud into a secret chink in the shack's wall. Trantor smiled evilly at him, as Brazos returned the bag to its place under the bunk, just as Carl came back.

CHAPTER X

JIM UNDERSTANDS

VANGIE knew that she owed something to Jim for having been seen by Prime with Easton in such an odd position that day. The good-hearted girl met the situation squarely by going to them, as they sat on a rock seat in the garden that evening, and saying: "Mr. Easton, Carl Trescott, he'll be hangin' his fool head over the corral bars soon. Watch the South Springs trail to-morrow." Then she left them.

In his deepest heart, Jim thanked Vangie for the abrupt way in which she had spoken, sweeping away all the ideas Prime might have formed as to his behavior with the other girl. He told Prime what Vangie had done and why, candidly, in fullest detail. Prime laughed happily, as he closed his tale.

The period of slight estrangement had worked in each like a leaven, yet each was unconscious of its workings. For the present it was good to be together in the old garden, under the friendly stars. But Prime saw her father's cigar glow down below and heard the creak of Kate's rocker!

Riding south trail next day Jim found Carl and Vangie together behind a clump of organ cactus. Vangie brought Carl out. The eager boy's rounded, almost girlish cheeks were gray under his tan, but his full lips were firmly set. Carl's easy-stepping cayuse rambled a bit, stepping forward, but steadied at Carl's low word. With a deep understanding of cowboy nature, Jim praised the horse to turn aside the edge of the tense moment.

"That hoss o' yorn's plumb full o' wisdom, Carl. He minds ever' word out o' yore fool head."

"His thoughts is sure wide an' liberal," replied Carl, forced to laugh, and the ice was broken. The boy began at once his manly plea: "I ain't crawling nor beggin'. Vangie says Bar Six has got an empty saddle peg waiting for my use."

"Yes, Carl," replied Easton eagerly, "on one condition."

"Big Jim, I told Brazos nothin' I knew of Bar Six. I won't tell you what I know 'bout Brazos."

"Carl, boy, what you say lines you out square. Report to Jarve!"

Carl's voice trembled in giving thanks. That one phrase had raised him from outlawry's verge to the frontier's highest favor—that of being a Bar Six hand. "I'll never forget, Big Jim." Carl sat a moment, hands cupped on his saddle's horn, head down in grateful silence. Then: "I'd like for to ride to Tin Cow first to buy a gift for a friend. I'll fan my hoss into Bar Six corral to-night."

"Get a ring that'll fit, Carl. Children, adios!" said Easton, and, with a warm smile for the twain, Jim touched Brilar and was gone.

Vangie at once leaned over in her saddle and twisted her slim fingers among the buttons of Carl's shirt front. The evident suffering of spirit of this boy who loved her so, his soft, but masculine, beauty won her.

Jim's chivalrous way of showing her the way of duty, the feeling that Jim never could be hers, and now Carl's need for mothering, made her heart go out to him, as when a ball rebounds from a wall to an eager catcher's hands.

She drew the lad's face to her own and kissed him. "I'm goin' t' be one honey love to you evermore, Carl," she told him, as he made ready to go for the love pledge.

"I hope yo're plumb pleased with me," replied

Carl, sighing happily. Then he was gone to get the ring.

Frazer received the news at first with great reserve. "Men that leaves Bar Six once don't come back." He had a pride of his own over the relations of hand and employer. It was evening, and they were all over the gallery summing up the day's events.

"I wouldn't have taken him, but it seemed too bad to let a good lad drift off with a man like Brazos," Jim wisely remarked.

"Brazos! Yes, anything we can do to spite him is well done. I mistrust that man."

Kate Bradon, sewing in the background, spoke: "I wonder if Brazos is as bad as painted? I never seen him do a wrong."

"He keeps too much to himself and has bad company," Frazer said abruptly.

"I like him far off," Jim remarked with his oblique humor.

"Jim, yo're foreman. If yo' want Carl back, take him."

"Thank you, sir," said Easton warmly.

"How did yo' get him to change his mind?"

"You must thank Miss Vangie for that."

Frazer stared at the embarrassed girl, then laughed. "Well, it takes a pretty girl to make wax of the boys. Vangie, I'll give you that pinto hoss t' pay for that. He's yours, mane to hoofs."

Vangie, blushing, filled with the sense of good work well done, petted by Prime and praised by all, was happy. Her mother, noting how well pleased Frazer really was with the girl, added her motherly praise to the chorus, and so Carl's home-coming was smoothed out, and he took his place with Bar Six riders again.

The continued harsh references of Frazer to

Brazos had convinced her that, if Brazos were to become foreman of Bar Six, even after she had cozened Frazer into marrying her, he would have to put himself on a more respectable footing than he at present occupied. Men out there had been known to dodge over the border line between crookedness and honesty and back again, and they had made good citizens thereafter. It was nothing in frontier experience for the toughest man in town to be elected marshal and to shoot the place into lawfulness. That Brazos should appear to reform, should get a background of better deeds against which to appear as a possible foreman for Bar Six, when Easton was disposed of, Kate Bradon knew to be necessary.

In a few days, when owner, foreman, hands, and also Prime and Vangie were getting ready for the round-up, Kate Bradon rode, ostensibly for Circle Dot X, but really for Dead Hole's rim.

She found Brazos and explained to him her reasons for wishing him to take on the appearance of better behavior. He was sullen enough at first, but gradually yielded to her views.

"I can have Trantor manage the cattle business in Lost Cañon," he said. "I will go into Tin Cow an' open up an eatin' joint for the summer. That will give me a chance to have my friends loafin' round, without causin' too much trouble."

"Who are your friends?" Kate asked indiscreetly.

"Never mind," he said sharply. "I may be a fool myself an' trust you too much, but I keep faith with the men that trust me."

"Brazos, you'll have to trust me fully. I'm working a big game for you," she answered, leaning toward him and putting a capable hand upon his shoulder.

"Are you? It might work both ways. Be sure it works mine," he said, going toward his horse.

CHAPTER XI

THE LAST WHISTLE

NEARNESS of round-up time made men so busy that Carl's return was not much discussed. Bed rolls and chuck wagons were made ready.

The round-up swung into the Willow Springs district to Mesa Hermosa, thirty-five miles north of Bar Six. Big Jim Easton, boss of it, went first; Frazer rode with his men, clad in old togs, on a sober cayuse, taking orders now from Jarve Larrabee, like any other puncher.

Bar Six arrived at the same time as the outfit from C Diamond Tail, who rode under Pete Brennan, the Strangers' grim chieftain for that year. Pete, like Ed, deferred to Jim's authority, for now Jim was king of a wide-flung empire, as large or small outfits joined up with the main push, all owning the round-up foreman as ruler.

Happy punchers rollicked; incoming saddle bands were prospected for likely quarter horses for races to come. Brags were made, bets angled for. Card games progressed on taut-pegged tarps; smoke of cook fires drifted pungently; a golden haze was over all, as the sun wheeled kindly above.

The day before real work began, Easton, with Parson Heber, C Diamond Tail's foreman, was discussing plans for the morrow. Pete Brennan, raising his gaze from a fascinating hand of euchre, first saw Brazos as he watched some youngsters shooting at cans thrown into the air. "Braz, come here!" Pete called sourly.

Brazos wheeled, his right hand up, palm out, the

plains peace sign. Frazer threw down his hand, was afoot spryly and at Brazos' side quickly.

"Braz, I warned you off Bar Six."

"This is open range, Frazer," answered Brazos boldly.

"Just keep away from Bar Six wagon, then."

"Ed, I been misjudged," Brazos declared, with a show of decent humility. "I'm quittin' the range for town. Goin' into business, if I can sell my stock fair."

"Does that int'rest us?" Brennan asked, crowding forward.

"Who's running this round-up?" Big Jim, now aware of it all, came up.

The two old-timers bit their lips and sat down. They had exceeded authority, broken the rule that made mere hands secondary to the foreman. Easton faced Brazos. "What do you want on the round-up?"

"I've got cattle, Jim. My brand's BK," he said, thus reminding them all that, even if a suspect, he had a standing as a rancher.

"We know it. We ain't thieves."

"No, I know you'll deal square. I'll send a hand to rep'sent me. You wouldn't let me into th' round-up," he said, with hang-dog bitterness. "I'm leavin' my place wide open. Round up my stuff. You count it for me, Jim. Get me a fair price for it, an' send me the money in to Tin Cow. I'm through with range work. All my neighbors turned sour on me without cause."

He went away, discouragement and humility in his going.

Some of the hands, larking in Tin Cow, reported that Brazos had opened a good eating house and was enjoying booming patronage.

"Not even a pack of cards in it! He's a swell

chink cook, an' he has dug up an old widow that can make 'bear sign,' three for a quarter," Silent reported.

The round-up swung below Bar Six. Circle Dot X had yielded three hundred head, that Pete Brennan bought of Kate Bradon. Pete also took Brazos' remnants, a poor lot, for Kingston had smuggled all his best breeders up to Lost Cañon, in advance of his leaving the range. He hoped by using his best bulls on his rustled cows to bring forth calves that would pass, on their markings, for his, and so create a herd that he could bring into the open in time.

Then the day came when Easton turned his authority as round-up chief over to Barney Caney, head of outfits south, and then Jim was just Bar Six foreman again. A salute of long sixes, then a scurry home, with the ecstasies of pay day nearing!

During the calf round-up, keen eyes had tallied out where the four thousand heavies, needed for the Omaha deal, could be found easily in the broken land north of Bar Six home base.

Now the trail herd was gathered in and headed toward Willow Springs at a leisurely pace, to take in all the good feed. Jim took Carl Trescott, Pecos Honeyman, Silent, Bob Grant, and "Rancocus Al," an old Bar Six puncher, just back from a visit down in Old Mexico, for the trip to Omaha.

As the last of the beeves were put in the cars, Easton, keeping tally at the chute's end, heard girlish laughter. It was Prime and Vangie, who told him they had come to town for a visit and shopping. Frazer had insisted that they take a holiday. They would ride back when the bunch returned from Omaha, a week thence.

"She's goin' to dance with all those light-foot boys in from th' round-ups, an' I'm to be her chapayoné," Vangie declared. One part of her remark was for

Carl, who appeared to be worried. "I'll dance, too; I know a nice boy."

"I won't let any other puncher take her, Carl," Prime said, as Carl pushed the last beef out of the chute with his punching pole.

"Well, hands, have a good time, wide an' liberal," Carl answered.

Jim joked with them, yet soberly, for he had his responsibilities—to get four thousand beeves to market, bring home the cash, keep his men sober and out of trouble.

The three cattle trains stood ready. The last whistle blew. The Bar Six men, who were remaining behind, drew their sixes and fired their farewell volleys; then the long yell sounded. The hindmost drag started. Vangie and Prime holstered their smoking guns. Prime, her eyes misted, saw Big Jim at the caboose's rear rail, waving good-by. The caboose grew smaller and was gone.

"I'll be glad when Jim gets back," Prime declared to Vangie.

"Who won't?"

The old engine, far up the track, over the chorus of bawling beeves, sent back the answer: "Who-o-o-o-ooooo!"

CHAPTER XII

THE ADEQUATE LADY

OMAHA'S business circles conceded the adequacy of Teresa Bolton, a maiden of thirty-eight years and much well-invested money. As a girl she had taken in washing to keep a roof over her invalid parents' heads. She had bought a small laundry machine, widened her plant into a steam laundry, that into a string of them, had sold out and gone into real estate.

At thirty-eight Miss Bolton appeared hardly thirty, with a rippling mass of corn-hued hair, keen gray eyes, many dimples, a tall, erect figure, a complexion that suited and was not store-made. She liked all sorts of fluffy, frilly, white and pinky dresses, was heart free, able to beat men in business through sheer brains and nerve. She had one secret fad and one open one. Her open fad was making her parents' lives happy. They loved Omaha. Her secret fad was a love of novels relating to frontier life. She yearned to know real range-land people. As the fads conflicted, Teresa bided her time.

It happened on a bright day that Teresa was over in the stockyard section, seeing to it that neither architect nor contractor, engaged upon alterations to one of her blocks, that paid her fifteen per cent profit a year, were remiss. She found occasion to set both men aright, to lecture the workingmen, then treat them to cigars.

As she left the job, she decided that she was less in favor of marrying than ever, for she had found so many men at fault that day that her

freckled nose was in the air at the whole inadequate sex.

Ahead, across the road, pointed upgrade between blocks, bound for a rear-alley smithy, was a wagon, heavily laden with forge coal. The driver was airing the genealogy of the horses hectically, also laying on the whip well, being praised by the helper who sat beside him.

Teresa stopped, watched, listened. The horses were not large, but wiry. Unmistakably their eyes walled back, and they snorted and plunged, as the whip's scorpion lash bit.

Once they cowered, made almost a pleading note, as they screamed. Attached to the load, they could not run away; hemmed in by the bricked bank on either hand, they could not wheel and smash things. They were trapped, the driver knew it and cursed, laying on well.

As the horses made that pleading note of terror, Teresa became aware that at her elbow was a very tall, very erect person, who wore a sombrero, but whose clothing in no other way differed from that of so many men to be met with about the stockyard district. Clearly a granger man, carrying new gloves in one well-cared-for hand. The fine face was lined with wrinkles about the kindly eyes, that rested warmly on Teresa.

The whip descended anew; the horses refused to face the grade. The cruel bits were crushing their tender jaws like twin vises.

Teresa could stand it no longer. "You two men get down; make that load four hundred pounds lighter."

The driver gave her a mean glance and nudged his helper. Neither spoke. Instead, the driver laid on the lash again. Teresa Bolton glanced at the big, tall man at her side. His brow was corrugated

in thought. He spoke, as the man ceased to use the whip, and the horses quit their plunging for a moment.

"Those are Circle-Diamond-Tail bronchos! Look at th' brand! Our neighbor, Pete Brennan, sold some surplus stock last year——"

"I'm goin' to let 'em rest a minute, an' then, if they don't make that hill, I'll cut 'em to ribbons," the driver declared, very much aloud, too, so that the interfering woman and the evidently fresh granger man might hear.

"That's it, 'Jerky,' give it to them," said the coal-carrying man.

"You bet, Falsey," replied the grinning driver.

"Them bronchos is th' best thing I've seen in this city," the big man was saying to Miss Bolton. "Like friends from home."

"Then you know them?" She was looking keenly at him to see if he were not joking, making game.

"You can't rightly say I know them," he replied, "but they're off a neighboring ranch to ours. I don't like to see bronchos misused. Of course, if there's hard work to do, they've got to do it, same as men have, but I don't believe in asking impossible things of either men or hosses."

Perhaps the driver heard this. He nudged Falsey, and they both grinned.

The big man cleared his throat and essayed a remark. "I hadn't ought to butt into another man's game, pilgrim, but it strikes me that, if you'd back out, make a new lunge from across th' street, so them bronchos can get a runnin' start, they'd take you over this boggy ford."

Jerky gathered up the lines and shook his whip until the bronchos cowered under it. The welts on their hides showed under the sweated hairs. Then

he said: "It strikes me yo're a fool country Jake. I'm drivin' this team, and I'll drive it my own way."

"They won't do their best unless you give them a runnin' start, sir," answered the granger very mildly.

Teresa Bolton snorted in disgust. "Why does he talk like that to them, with all his inches?" she was asking herself.

Jerky was glaring down at the granger man and shaking his whip. He spoke savagely: "They'll do their best, or I'll slash them with this whip till they jump through their skins an' run up there, load an' all, in their meat an' bones."

"That's the talk," Falsey declared. "It's your team."

"I wouldn't if I were you," the big man said very softly.

Teresa Bolton heard the voice and sniffed and wished she were a man. She looked at his eyes, and then she took another thought.

Jerky stood up on the seat and swished the whip in grim preliminary. Teresa Bolton spoke in final appeal: "I beg of you, Mr. Driver, don't whip those horses again. They've done their best and——"

"Cut th' livers out o' them," said Falsey bitinglly.

"Don't do it," declared the soft-voiced granger man, who now swept his hat on to the back of his big head. Teresa Bolton saw and wondered at the whiteness of his forehead below the hat's sweat-band.

"No, please don't," Miss Bolton added.

"Shut up, you," said Jerky, raising the whip to slash and letting fall a name at her that seared.

Teresa Bolton never was certain as to the events of the next few moments. The soft-voiced granger leaped, and he was atop the load of coal. He grasped a coat collar in each hand. Jerky and Fal-

sey, not averse, mixed it eagerly and briskly. The three rolled off on to the walk and into the gutter.

The bronchos, as Jerky's foot came off the brake, felt the wagon pulling them back, and they came with it, rearing and squealing. They began to exercise long-slashed-out talents and bucked and plunged, but the big load and the heavy harness held them.

In the gutter, having rolled to one side, thus escaping the descending wagon and frantic horses, a human cyclone gyrated. At times the granger man was underneath, at times one or the other of the others, at times both. The granger man seemed hard to keep down. He had a disconcerting way of fighting with hands, feet, knees, elbows. Once he even butted Jerky in the stomach with his big head, and then, as Jerky staggered back, the granger man got a fair hold of Falsey and whirled atop of him and began to pummel most systematically. Apparently he had discounted Jerky, who, however, behind the granger's back, began to squirm erect.

Teresa Bolton, at first in terror, had regained her adequacy. She sensed that the granger man could care for himself—if given a chance. A crowd by this time had begun to collect. Men waited, agog, not wishing to interfere; several women exclaimed at the sight of all three combatants.

Just as the granger man had reduced Falsey to a state of grace, and he was demanding to be let up, confessing that he had enough, Jerky, his head somewhat clearer, swayed into a sitting posture, reached into his rear pocket, and brought out a something that fitted over his knuckles. He surged his body and would have arisen upright, behind the granger man, who was engaged in making Falsey come completely into a state of grace.

At that moment Teresa Bolton dashed forward

and twined her fingers in the hair of Jerky and pulled. Jerky fell over backward.

"Policeman's coming," some one said.

"She's his wife, helping him," exclaimed a fat man.

"I am not," Teresa Bolton declared.

The granger got up like a flash and lifted Jerky on top of Falsey. The crowd closed in, and Teresa Bolton was inside the ring. Jerky and Falsey gave up. The granger man dragged them up, a hand on each collar.

"You'll apologize to the lady," he said, and he shook them like twin bags of bones.

They mumbled an apology, whereat the crowd cheered, and Miss Bolton blushed.

The granger man spoke again: "Now you'll apologize to them bronchos an' promise to give 'em a chance for their white alleys."

Jerky and Falsey were for balking at this, but the crowd took in what the granger man had in mind and added their insistence to his. The circle opened, and the bronchos were revealed up the street, quiet now and looking back to see what all the racket was. Falsey and Jerky, being shoved before them, did promise to be more reasonable in their demands upon them, and then the belated policeman crashed through the ring and demanded to know what it was all about.

A hubbub arose, every one, except Miss Bolton and the granger man, trying to explain at once. When the din subsided, she handed the policeman her card, which he studied a moment. Being a wise and politic policeman he fixed his gaze upon Falsey and Jerky disapprovingly.

"Hey, youse, what do you mean by being cruel to horses? I ought to run youse in."

"What does he mean by bein' cruel to drivers?"

Jerky asked, pointing at the granger. "But I had a good fight, an' I'm not goin' to make a complaint. Are you, Falsey?" Falsey shook his coal-smutted head emphatically.

The policeman glanced at the card again and spoke oracularly: "I ought to run the bunch in for obstructing traffic."

He twirled his club and wisely walked off. The granger man glanced to Miss Bolton, who was laughing, at Jerky and Falsey, who were smiling through their grime, then at the crowd, that was melting away, disappointed because the show was so soon ended.

Miss Bolton fished out a purse from a handy pocket in her skirt and gave Falsey and Jerky a small bill each. She turned to seek for the granger man, who was shyly edging away. A small boy had handed him a much-battered hat, and he was brushing mud off it with his elbow, while he held it in one hand that was bleeding at the knuckles.

"Mr.—Mr.——" she called after him. "Let me thank you."

He turned about and stood before her, his hat in his hand.

"Put on your hat and come with me to the drug store," she said firmly.

The granger man grinned. He wanted to be away from the lady and get cleaned up. He suspected he was a sight. She confirmed his suspicions by saying: "You need to look into a mirror. Come with me."

She got him by the arm, and he went. This primly dressed, very good-looking woman, who could talk man talk, warmed his heart.

Inside the drug store she took charge, shooing the astonished clerk back to his prescription counter, getting the granger man to the sink in there, ap-

appropriating the druggist's own towel, and telling the clerk sharply to get some gauze and medicated soap.

In a few moments the granger man had removed the scars of conflict. He brushed his clothing, and the lady brushed his hat. Then she paid the druggist and got hold of the astounded granger man and steered him on to the sidewalk.

"What is your name?" she asked.

"James Easton, of Bar Six," he replied, raising his hat.

"I am Miss Teresa Bolton of Omaha. Wasn't it about time we knew each other?"

"I don't think we'll ever forget each other, ma'am. You standing up for them bronchos like that an' pullin' that geezer's hair——"

"I never did such a thing," she said indignantly, but smiling.

"You surely did, and a most complete job you did, ma'am," Jim answered, smiling in his turn.

"Couldn't you take me to dinner, Mr. Easton," Teresa asked suddenly and, it must be confessed shamelessly. Here was a man from the ranch lands, about which she had read so many thrilling romances. Teresa wanted to see more of him.

"I could not, ma'am, not rightly so."

"Oh, then——" She really was angry now. "I suppose I've made a fool of myself by forcing myself upon you. But why can't you take me?"

"Because, ma'am, my friends are down street, gettin' a mild skate on."

"What?"

"An' I want t' join them——"

"Sir!"

"To see that they don't get all tanked up. I got to get them back to Bar Six, safe an' sound."

"Oh!" She was smiling again. "What is this Bar Six?"

"Ed Frazer's ranch out below Willow Springs, a long lope or two. I'm his foreman, in to sell a train of cattle. Them hands, now, I turned them loose with five dollars each, an' I want to get them."

"Bring them all with you and come to my home. I like a bit of company," she exclaimed, fibbing most unaccountably. Miss Bolton, since twining her fingers in Jerky's dirty hair, had had a number of startling thoughts, wholly foreign to her former experience. That part of her mind that delighted in the stories of frontier life and adventure was working now, full blast.

Big Jim studied her a moment, then his slow smile came and he said: "I thought Eastern folks was plumb unfriendly, but you ain't. You won't mind the boys not being in b'iled shirts? I had to have one to look civilized, doing business proper for Bar Six, but them boys are plumb keerless in their sartorial embellishments, ma'am."

"Bring them just as they are. Here is my address." Miss Bolton gave him a card, and he bowed gravely, thanked her, and left her. She called a cab and was soon on her way home to make ready for the evening. She did not care for business that day.

Jim walked away, wondering if he were not in the midst of a daydream. A black eye and the tender end of his nose told him he had been through part of it, but he doubted the other part—about having been invited to bring the boys to dine at a real rich lady's home.

Teresa Bolton, on her part, had a rather hectic time of it. It was necessary to make her capable housekeeper and servants bestir themselves. The dining room was softly lighted, and the meal was just food—baked beans, plenty of broiled steaks, potatoes, gravy, white bread and brown, three kinds of pie, a pudding, and ice cream!

The aged parents, above stairs, were in the care of their trained nurses, while below stairs their vivid and energetic daughter indulged for once her feeling for adventure and frontier life. She let them eat in silence, passing everything in large dishes that they might not be embarrassed with courses. At first they were offish, but being really hungry and finding everything good, they ate freely and showed honestly that they liked their food.

Miss Bolton, beaming upon them all, urged them to eat and eat still more. When the last of the ice cream had gone the way of all good food, sedate glasses of neat stuff were served and then cigars, which Miss Bolton begged them to light and puff away at.

"A man has got to smoke to enjoy himself," she declared.

"How did yo' find that out?" Jim asked, eyes twinkling. He was watching Silent, for once living up to his name.

"I make my living understanding men. I do business with them and beat them at their own game," she replied. "When a man is smoking peacefully, while he opens up a deal with me, I know he's in good humor and easy to persuade."

"If he smoked cigars like this, you'd be able to steal his eye teeth," Al said.

"Now tell me about yourselves—about Bar Six," she said, sitting back easily, for she was having a good time with her first plunge into adventure.

Jim, seeing she was really interested and not making fun, began to talk about Bar Six. He told of the ranch, its inmates, giving her a general idea of them all. He praised Frazer highly and Prime and Vangie, and the men nodded approval. Curiously he did not refer to Kate Bradon. He noticed how Miss Bolton waxed sympathetic when he told

of the death of Frazer's wife, and he enlarged upon her goodness, and the men cleared their throats huskily.

"I know Bar Six now," Teresa said, as Jim finished. "Almost wish I could see it."

"Why not? Frazer'd be glad, after your treatment of we-all."

"I might, some time, if business permits," she said, eyes sparkling. Then she made a proposal: "Let's go to a show. There's fine minstrels at the Orpheum. I haven't dared go there since I made money. I'd like a real laugh."

"If we can pay for th' box seats," Pecos exclaimed.

She nodded.

At the minstrels, old-time songs were on the program, and old-time jokes, newly dressed, made them all laugh. In high feather they took her afterward to a restaurant, where they all lunched, with many a good story to make the time pass all too quickly. Then, in the best carriages in Omaha, they took her home, each man her devoted slave. She bade them good night with this remark:

"You may see me at Bar Six, some day. Good-by and good luck!"

"Good-by," came the husky, happy chorus of male voices.

Then they headed for the depot. Morning found them far toward the setting sun.

CHAPTER XIII

KID FROM ARIZONE

BRAZOS KINGSTON fared well in Tin Cow. He knew he was a man suspected; that at first sign of evil doings he would be found swinging, with the Stranglers' noose about his neck. He carried no visible weapons, attended to business. Folks began to say of him: "Brazos is plumb gentle—off th' prod."

Brazos watched the mail, especially when José Almonté rode in from Bar Six. Brazos himself rode there no more. He gave the public good service, clean food, and he prospered. If certain hard-faced men tarried at Brazos' eating place, Tin Cow did not notice, for there were many such, and they had to feed somewhere.

One such came to Tin Cow not long after Brazos opened up. A man young, small, wiry, thin-lipped, eyes shifty; a man who entered a room quickly and got to the door jamb's side like a flash, that he might not be shot from behind by a possible enemy in the street; a man who jerked outdoors all set; who crossed the street diagonally.

Because of such actions Tim Cow ticketed him as one not averse to gun fighting, perhaps a man who knew he might be called upon to draw and meet a death threat at any moment. This man said little of himself and gave his name out as Billy McGee. Always bragging of how fine things were "down in Arizone, whar men grow ha'r on their teeth," they called him "Kid from Arizone."

Kid played stud neatly, avoided fights, yet all knew he could fight. Kid ate with Brazos and slept

under his own tarp, out on the edges somewhere. He had been in town a week without drawing Brazos into acquaintanceship, although he tried it when possible.

Then one day Brazos, in his cubby-hole behind the eating bar, conned a note received that day from Kate Bradon.

Frazer doesn't credit you with honest intent in turning into town. I've said all I can. Think up a plan to help.

Brazos studied the possibilities. Kid from Arizona sauntered in and ordered ham-and. Brazos' quick eye noted the clean strip of cloth down the inner seam of each trouser leg, showing where stirrup leather had kept the dust off otherwise well-powdered clothing. Kid from Arizona had been riding. Kid from Arizona was watching Brazos from one corner of a vigilant eye, the other was warily on the door.

Again Brazos studied Kate's appeal for proof of honest living. Then he watched Kid from Arizona aslant. Brazos tucked the letter inside his vest and began to drum on one side of the half-barrel chair he occupied. He was drumming the rhythm of an ancient outlaw song, once popular along the border.

Kid from Arizona finished dabbing up the last of the ham gravy with the tough white of the final egg. He lounged over to the door of the cubby-hole and leaned on the jamb of that door, smiling down at Brazos, who ceased not his drumming, but seemed as if in a daydream.

"Some tune, that!" Kid from Arizona remarked.

Brazos started guiltily and ceased his idle drumming. "Oh, that! It means nothin' to me—now."

"Now?"

They regarded each other closely, and then Brazos framed his florid face in a fleeting smile. Then, al-

most before discerned, that smile was gone. Kid from Arizone glanced about the room and at the street. No one else near! Kid from Arizone bent over and whispered meaningly: "Would you do a good job of work—now?"

"How good?" asked Brazos, lifting the right-hand side of his mouth.

"Man told me off down below you were 'on the scout' sometimes."

"Men tell a lot," said Brazos, smiling to lure the Kid on.

"I was over to Willow Springs to-day. Hard ride, but I got a real hoss, if he does look some hesitatin' in his gait."

"So I've noticed, Kid."

"Found out in Willow Springs that Jim Easton and the others from Bar Six, that have been away sellin' steers, will be home in a week."

"They don't int'rest me none." Brazos' tone was altogether too indifferent to be convincing.

"They'll bring a lot o' cash money, I figure. All that steer money wasn't banked, you bet. Easton'll be carrying a wad home for ranch expenses."

"Things are slow here," replied Brazos, with the right amount of hesitancy in tone and manner.

"You bet they're slow. Say, Brazos, I wonder at you."

"Wonder at myself at times." The bitterness in tone and gesture were obviously real.

"Well?"

"I'll think it over. But, if I go through, remember that, while you'll ramble, I'll stay. Act from now on as if we were hostile."

Kid from Arizone wisely went, inwardly glowing at his success. Kid from Arizone gave it out within the hour that Brazos was too stiff for common folks; that he, Kid from Arizone, intended to pull his

freight to another eating bar. This he did, making loud public moan against Brazos. Once they met on the street and glared. Kid from Arizone insisted Brazos still packed a gun somewhere about him.

A day later Brazos read *The Willow Springs Eagle* in public. The newspaper stated that there was a fine cookstove for sale at the Springs. Brazos enlarged upon it openly. He hadn't bought a large enough one for his eating bar; had a notion to go to the Springs to buy that one, out of Foley's joint, just closed on account of Foley's sudden demise from leaden hail. He showed the advertisement to several.

Kid from Arizone disappeared next day. There was nothing strange in the incident, for he had done so before and rambled back again. After Kid had gone, Brazos dropped hints about him. Kid from Arizone was too liberal with his time, thought Brazos. Men had been known to loaf like that in a town, disappear, and, before folks could realize it, a hold-up had occurred.

"Bad hombre, that Kid," several good citizens declared.

Brazos nodded. Two days later he rode out of Willow Springs, not on Comet, but on a hired nag. It seemed that Comet had a sore tendon then. Going out, Brazos showed several good citizens that he was armed.

"I'm packing cash for th' stove an' other things," he said. "With men like Kid hidin' out, a man can't be too careful."

They agreed fully. So Brazos fared forth. Half-way to Willow Springs, Kid from Arizone came riding from a clump of mesquite, thin lips grinning, as Brazos told him of his latest measures to fool the simple-minded citizens of Tin Cow. Brazos fin-

ished: "Fooled them entire. They think we're hostile. I've got a black beard, too."

It was big, ample, finely made, and Kid smiled.

"I'm on, Braz. Wanted to leave it so you could live square at home after I ramble? When I side a man, I go the whole hog. Make yourself safe."

"I knew you was white, soon's I saw you, Kid," he replied, with a fine show of florid gratitude that Kid received as his due.

Kid spoke again: "Braz, I've got the place spied out at Twin Buttes."

"Kid, yo're right. Listen! We ride there together. We wait till they're sighted. I'll put on my false beard. I'll look like a son o' peace, entire. They won't know me. I'll ride out bold; you stay behind th' left-hand butte. I'll git them talkin' an' slide past. Then you whirl down on them in front; I'll get them from behind. They're stuck up. Got that sawed-off muzzle loader?"

Kid lifted the scabbard flap at his thigh.

Brazos took it out to admire the hand carving and the silver insets on trigger guard and butt. Twice he cocked it to try the lock. "Fine gun," he said. "Them new caps?" he asked, fingering one.

Kid nodded. "Sure!" Brazos let down the right-hand hammer and gave the gun to Kid, who scabbarded it.

They lounged on then until close to Twin Buttes. A thin clump of blooming mesquite, drowsy with hum of bees, gave them shade, as they waited. They talked low, and said little, for each was wary; each feared that a slip might tell the other too much, even in a chance wayside chat.

"Here they come," exclaimed Brazos, his ear to the ground for the tenth time. "Now I'll lick on this beard. I sure was wise to ride a hoss strange to this Bar Six bunch. This whisker don't fit snug,

so I may have to nurse it goin' toward them, like I was scratchin' my chin. But let me once get behind them—you know!"

Kid from Arizone's face, grimly set, now that business was at hand, did not crack into his usual thin-lipped smile at these pleasantries.

The pair swung ahead. Kid saw that his shotgun was loose in its scabbard. Brazos took out his six-gun, twirled the cylinder that he might make sure each chamber was full. Kid then joked Brazos about his farmerish look in that beard.

The Bar Six men were nearing. At any moment a horse might whicker. Kid and Brazos spoke soothingly to their mounts. Girlish laughter sounded.

"I'll go now," Brazos whispered, bending forward, riding in a direct line from Kid, whose gaze was on that place alongside the nearest butte, where the Bar Six men would soon appear.

Kid from Arizone sensed that Brazos was making a last-moment effort to adjust that ill-fitting black beard. He did not watch Brazos narrowly, for his part in what was to come had to be done as swiftly as lightning, or he would be killed. He swung the short gun across his lean thighs, hand on upper barrel, thumb of the other on hammer, index finger on the trigger of one barrel, next finger on the other trigger. He would fire both barrels at need. He did not know it, but, as Brazos had rounded that corner, he had whisked off that beard, crushed it into his shirt front, and so had met the approaching party with his own florid face showing!

Brazos gentled his horse toward the Bar Six folk, who at once drew together, indicating by this action that he was a person suspect and not wanted in their presence. He kept his unbearded face straight ahead; first, because he did not want Kid from Arizone to unleash the fury of that shotgun's terrific

power into the small of his back, should Kid discover proof of possible duplicity; second, he had a character of injured innocence to sustain with the Bar Six group, who stared. With just the right degree of condescension for the ladies, and especially for Vangie, as an old acquaintance, he swept his hat off, with a rather surly greeting.

"Howdy, folks!"

Then he was past. All of them half wheeled, as he rode on. Several hands strayed weaponward, but the eyes of Brazos were straight ahead. Then he was well in their rear.

Suddenly a cry rang out: "Hands up!"

Bar Six folk wheeled and looked into the ends of two short, sawed-off barrels.

Kid from Arizone, his thin lips half raised in a snarl, was steady on his horse, his eyes glinting wickedly and convincingly down the little hollow between those two short barrels filled with buck-shot. So loaded and scattering well, both barrels would kill them all at that range, as they sat bunched there, taken pitifully unaware.

Events were now in split seconds. All hands went up, for there was no other thing to do. Robbery was threatened, but then robbery was not to be placed against injury to the girls, every Bar Six rider sensed. With the girls out of it, they would have chanced it, shot it out with the road agent, though death invaded their own ranks. As it was, they had to submit. None of them was looking at Brazos, whose horse began to swing about strangely behind Bar Six folks, and his gun leaped forth.

Kid was seen to swerve his gun toward Brazos, and his mouth half opened to rip out an oath of bewildered rage, and then Brazos' gun spat once.

As Jim Easton and the other folks fairly jumped in their saddles at this climax to the scene, the

hammer of the gun of Kid from Arizone snapped down futilely and he, with a neat hole in his forehead and a look of surprise on his face, pitched out of the saddle.

"Suspected he was a crook when I left him and rode away from him, after he rode out o' that mesquite patch, below those buttes an' got a match of me," Brazos said. "I rode away soon's I could shake him casual, an' I didn't realize he was so close behind me. Yo're a fine bunch to hold yore hands up for him." He pointed contemptuously at the dead man, whose horse was already running away.

"That was some quick draw you made, Brazos," Jim remarked grudgingly, for it was humiliating to have Bar Six shamed and put upon in that way, and then saved from being robbed by Brazos.

"Well, I didn't waste no time. I rely on you-all to tell how it was. I've been warned, as you-all know, not to do any shootin'."

"We'll tell it straight—and thanks." Full-voiced, if curt, was the general acknowledgment.

Jim and others swung down. The young gunman, lying on his face, was still. They turned him over, and the look of surprise was still on his features. Brazos did not come close to the body, but no one noticed that. Silent went to bring in the dead man's horse. They searched his clothing and saddle pocket. Oddly enough, Kid's gun lacked a cap on that right-hand nipple, hence the misfire. They found little cash and nothing to identify him. And so, there being nothing else to do, they scooped out a shallow grave for him, loaded it with rocks and left him—a bit of human débris, with a cross to mark his resting place.

CHAPTER XIV

FACE TO FACE

THERE was an exaggerated heartiness to the greeting that Ed Frazer gave to Easton and his happy company of folk, as they clattered up the little slope and rounded to before the big house to report their arrival. He came out of the house hurriedly and had a dozen kisses for Prime, a fleeting hug for Vangie, and handclasps for all the others, beginning with Jim and going through the crowd. Jarve Larabee, who had heard them coming and had hurried up from below, spraddling wide in his bespurred gait, seemed to wear an air of mystery. José Almonté, catching Prime's eye, saluted her with grave respect and went away.

Frazer was talking to them all at once, making queries of Jim as to how the trip turned out; of Vangie as to how many dances she had attended in Willow Springs; of Prime as to how many hearts she had broken there; of the boys as to their behavior in Omaha.

The incessant talk of his employer astounded Jim, who had been accustomed to think of Frazer as a man very sparing of words, even as contrasted with the taciturn men of his class. Eager Mexican lads took the horses of Jim, Prime, and Vangie in response to Frazer's storming calls. The hands rode joyously away to their quarters; Jarve hastened to follow them, after a few good-natured exchanges with Jim Easton.

There was an air of expectancy about Frazer that was accentuated as some one from indoors was heard coming. Then it flashed over Prime that Kate Bradon had not been there to welcome them, too.

Suddenly Kate stood in the doorway, her face a little pale, but her eyes were brilliant. The glint in them made Prime, who studied them, instantly vaguely ill at ease.

The woman stepped into the sunlight and gave Vangie a warm greeting, which the girl returned in kind. Then she gave her cool hand to Jim, and he was grave in his courtesy. Lastly she turned to Prime, who felt an unaccountable inclination to evade any elaborate welcome home from her, but her father's voice, trembling with an emotion new to him, came to her.

"Prime, dear, Kate and I have a surprise for you."

"A surprise?" She let her eyes rove from one to the other.

Jim stiffened, sensing something alien to his former experience. Vangie languidly shifted her gum and smiled.

"Yes, a surprise," he said and stopped. His tongue seemed tied, and he tugged at the collar of his soft shirt, as if it were too tight. His face went red and then white. In confusion he turned to the woman. "Kate, you tell them."

"Your father and I rode down to San Felipé the day after you-all left and were married." At San Felipé was an old decaying mission. Her words were distinct, and she was coolly mistress of herself.

Frazer, his face still red, was plainly embarrassed. Vangie, with a little gurgle of pleasure, went to her mother and gave her a kiss and a warm hug. Jim found himself shaking hands with Frazer, yet there was in his congratulations little warmth, for he felt oddly uneasy.

Prime, with an evident effort, stepped up to her father and put her arms about his shoulders. Their

eyes met in a long, long period of psychic testing. His eyes fell; hers brimmed with tears. She drew his head down and kissed him on the cheeks. Then she loosed herself from his clasp and faced the woman.

"Dad, I wish you both much joy." She gave her hand to her stepmother, but not her lips. As she drew back, Kate Frazer felt that she was outside the girl's circle of love. Kate had expected just this and had thought over what she should do when it came to pass.

"You will love me, as you do your father," she said. "I am going to win you to me, if I can."

"There, Prime, you can't ask fairer than that," Frazer said loudly. "Could she, Jim?"

"Miss Prime, she'll do what's right, every time," Jim answered diplomatically.

Frazer drew him aside to inquire as to the details of the trip. Prime, to cover her apparent lack of warmth for Kate, put her arm about Vangie's waist, and the three women fell to talking, although their conversation went rather at random. The first subject broached was the way in which they had met Brazos, and what he had done in the matter of the Kid from Arizone. Jim already was giving his version of it to Frazer, who called across to Kate:!

"Hear 'bout that? Brazos turned saint an' killin' th' sinners on the trails?"

"I always told you Brazos wasn't so bad as he might have been," she answered.

"Yes, I know," he replied slowly. "I'll give the cuss credit for one thing. If he ever lived up to his reputation, he didn't do his dirty work close by home. He kept his deviltry for export."

"I don't like the man, an' I never did, but he split that road agent kid wide open, and that was something," Jim remarked.

"Probably had some money of his own that he wanted to defend," Frazer said. "Well, we'll chalk it up to his credit. He saved the Stranglers a job. Kid from Arizone was under close watch, on general suspicion, and he was shot in time to escape hanging."

Kate Bradon, who had been waiting for news from Brazos that would give him a better standing in the neighborhood, had accepted the hold-up story at its true value. She could see the deep purpose of Brazos underneath the surface of the case.

Prime and Vangie went indoors, and Kate followed to give orders to the servants to have things laid out for them, that they might remove the stains of travel and dress for a day indoors.

It was only midafternoon, and Frazer detained Easton for a long talk as to what he had found out about market prospects, and as to certain purchases of material and supplies Jim had made in Omaha, for shipment to Willow Springs. Frazer complimented Jim on his handling of the beeves and received the cash Jim had brought out from the Springs. Jim could sense that Frazer was yearning to talk of something else.

"How did Trescott act?" Frazer asked.

"Entirely fine."

"We'll forget about that li'l' pass of his with Brazos."

"I think he's made good."

But that evidently was not what Frazer wished to discuss. Jim would rather have been down in the bunk houses, talking with the hands for a spell, since Frazer had exhausted the big topics by that time. But Frazer kept bringing up little matters that could have waited until after that first day of home-coming for discussion.

Jim sat quiet for a time, hoping Frazer would talk

himself out, but he did not. Instead he went indoors and presently came out with a box of heavy black cigars and a decanter of liquor. He invited Jim to drink and smoke. Jim took one of the lighter cigars, as usual.

Frazer lighted up one of the big black ones and inhaled the smoke greedily. He poured out for himself a great drink of raw liquor and gulped it avidly. Jim studied his employer, sipping the while a little light wine, that he poured from the red Bohemian bottle that was kept for him. Frazer urged him to take liquor. Jim refused.

"Foreman of Bar Six ought to have a clear head," he said.

"Yes, you got a level one, Jim. I guess I'm drinking a bit heavier. Somehow the light wine doesn't take hold. Neither do the light cigars. I kept on the go while you were gone, hectorin' after Jarve Larrabee. He's all right in his way, but he isn't you, Jim." Slapping Jim on the knee he poured out another drink for himself. "I seem to need more edge to what I smoke and drink than I did a while back. I must be getting old."

"You're not old. This gettin' married has unsettled yore nerves," Jim replied. It was the first direct reference he had made to his employer's changed condition.

"Quit teasin', Jim," said Frazer, glad of this sign of interest. "I'll tell you how it was. We needed a head to the house inside. Those Mexican women would've run me crazy in a year, without some strong manager like Kate over them. Then she's a good-looking woman, too, and will make a good appearance for Bar Six, as head of th' house, don't you think?" He was anxious for Jim's good opinion.

"She's sure some handsome," Jim replied truth-

fully, "an' she'll make a good manager of those servants."

Jim had left much unsaid, but what he had said pleased the easily satisfied bridegroom.

Frazer leaned forward and slapped Jim's knee again. "You didn't see a better one in all yore travels."

Jim fell to laughing and had hard work to control his enjoyment. Frazer leaned forward for the point of the joke he felt was coming.

"I'll tell you 'bout th' 'Adequate Lady,' as we call her." Then Jim told of the ill-used bronchos, and how he had interfered, and how Miss Teresa Bolton had taken his part by pulling Jerky's hair, and also of the after event—the dinner and the theater party.

"Now that woman would have made a good manager for Bar Six," Jim was remarking, unaware that Kate had made her way to the doorway and was listening.

She came out, smiling. "What woman are you trying to put in my place so soon?" she asked.

She had changed to a dress of gray silk, with an edging of pink about the collar and cuffs, and her warm-toned hair was piled high over her forehead. Jim caught the warm glance of admiration that Frazer gave her and understood how completely the woman held the man to her.

"Tell her about the Adequate Lady," Frazer said to Jim.

In rapid phrases he began to sketch the incident. Kate made little of it, cutting him off before he had half finished.

"She wanted to get you men together, so she could have something to talk 'bout afterward. I don't see what there was to be excited about over whopping a pair of bronchos a little. I've seen you, Jim

Easton, almost split a broncho's hide open, an' no one got mad."

"Well, I always give a hoss a chance," Jim replied. "An' then, if he doesn't do what's right, I pour leather into him. But those bronchos was beat before they started, an' he wasn't givin' 'em a chance."

"I see how it was," Frazer remarked, pouring himself out a third big drink. Jim glanced at it disapprovingly. "Jim didn't like t' see those bronchos from Circle Diamond Tail misused. They were like neighbors, being put upon in a strange town."

"That's it," replied Jim, as Frazer poured the fiery liquor down his throat. "Say, boss"—with the frank manner of the typical cowman—"ain't you hittin' that bottle pretty hard?"

Frazer stared at Jim a moment, then he said: "Mebbe I am, Jimmy—mebbe I am." There was no trace of anger in his voice.

Kate spoke sharply. "I think Mr. Frazer can take care of himself. He's no baby."

"I didn't mean for to say he couldn't," Jim remarked shortly, getting up and starting away; "but I stick to what I said. S'long, boss."

He jingled away toward the place where the hands were waiting, for by now they had all edged back to the home base, except the few riders in certain line camps, that were kept going on the extreme limits of Bar Six territory north and south, to watch against too much drifting. East or west, dry lands or rough country held the cattle back fairly well, or good neighbors would turn them, receiving like service, should need arise, from Bar Six, in return.

After Jim had gone, Kate went over to Frazer and stood behind his chair. She reached down and took his flushed cheeks in her cool, firm hands and bent over him. She kissed him warmly and then

laughed. "The idea that my big man can't take a drink, if he wants it, without harm."

"Oh, Kate, Jim, he didn't mean much. He's like a son, almost."

"A foreman can get too intimate with his boss. You're not like an ordinary small rancher, Ed. I want you to hold yourself up more. You've got to have discipline, havin' so many hands workin' for you."

"My hands work with me," he replied. "There's a difference."

"I know, but my big man is too easy with them," she said, kissing her big man again and laughingly avoiding his attempt to return the kiss.

She evaded him as he got upright, a bit unsteadily, and went to sit in a chair a little way off. Frazer returned to where he could grasp the bottle handily.

Prime came out quickly, evidently intent upon something. She addressed her stepmother. "Have you finished clearing up your stuff off Circle Dot X?"

"Yes. Why? Thinking of moving right in there?"

"No, not now." She was holding to her point, in spite of her smile. "But I want to take possession."

"Why, Prime, not goin' t' leave us?" her father inquired in mock sorrow. He poured out another drink. Prime, seeing the size of it, frowned. Frazer noticed the frown.

"You goin' to lecture me, like Jim Easton did, on th' size of my drinks?"

Prime flushed and bit her lips. "So Jim spoke of it, then? Well, never mind. But about Circle Dot X." She turned again to Kate. "If I complete payment, can I have possession at once?"

"Yes," replied Kate, for she needed more money now for her secret uses with Brazos.

"Dad, pay her what is due for the balance and charge it against my savings account."

"It'll take 'bout all yo've got," said Frazer. This queer insistence of Prime's was somehow irritating to her father.

"Never mind about that! Pay her, please, dad."

"All right." Frazer got control of himself and began to count out the money from the big roll which Jim had brought. This money had been left lying on the table all this time, as Jim had dropped it. Prime got her receipt from Kate, and thus the control of Circle Dot X passed to her completely.

"Anything else for my rival in th' cow business?" Frazer asked of Prime.

"Yes, one thing more," she answered firmly. "I've got my own little brand, PF. You've given me a few head, now and then, to fuss with. They've increased. I've kept tally on them and know where my cattle range."

"Your cattle and my cattle, eh?" Frazer frowned just a little, then began to laugh. "Are you goin' to set up real opposition to Bar Six?"

"No, but it's time I showed what I could do on my own. I can get my stuff located over on my own ranch. I can have my little herd where they will be truly mine."

"Going to hire a hand?" Kate asked suddenly.

"Yes. I want a hand, but that can wait."

"Well, Little Augur," said Frazer, using her pet name for the first time since she had returned, "have some of the boys fan those cattle of yours over on to that big, expansive ranch. They'll sure get lost in all that space."

"All right, dad," she answered, ignoring the sarcasm. "I'm going to have a sure-enough ranch of my own, if it isn't bigger than a pint of *pulque*."

She went away, humming a refrain from one of the waltzes she had enjoyed while in Willow Springs.

CHAPTER XV

THE SHOW-DOWN

KATE'S exact steps in estranging those two fond hearts would be hard to describe in type. It was done by sly hints. Kate posed as a martyr to Prime's irritability. Frazer, direct and simple-hearted, did not read the signs; the girl, like her father, was led on subtly to oppose him.

Frazer would come in, hot and dusty, to find a cool drink awaiting him, but Kate, after making Ed comfortable, would sigh and cast up her eyes. Frazer, learning to associate this facial mask with Prime, would demand, striking the arm of his chair with his balled fist: "Kate, what is it?"

"Oh," she would reply, with a shrug of her shapely shoulders, "nothing. It's all right, so long's Prime——"

Then followed an eloquently malignant silence, that Frazer took for angelic resignation. Such a situation would be timed by Kate, so that it culminated exactly as Prime, glowing, hopeful of winning her way back into her father's love, would appear, eager to please and radiant. Frazer would meet her with icy reserve. Prime would draw back, bruised in spirit, proudly resentful. Kate would go away, leaving them to clash.

From somewhere a large, coarse-featured Mexican woman appeared, being installed by Kate as her second in charge. She was Annuncio Lacoste, reputed among the Mexicans to have an evil eye. Accordingly she was feared. She picked at Prime, running to Kate when Prime flared at her with righteous Frazer anger.

Prime always had cared for her own rooms, taking pleasure in doing that much indoors. She prided herself upon keeping those rooms immaculately in order, especially her bedroom. The others she considered as her own, too—a sitting room and tiny reception room. The bedroom was the girl's own sanctuary, to which she retired when troubled or merely desirous of enjoying a quiet daydream.

Coming in one afternoon, Prime passed her dad with a cordial nod and Kate without a show of hostility. There had been no actual clash for days. Frazer was beginning to hope. Neither he nor Prime saw the sly smile which Kate sent after the girl.

Prime went straight to her room, for it would be silent and cool there. Healing would come from the atmosphere so filled with the spirit of her dead mother.

Crossing the outer room, Prime noted that her bedroom door was open. Not merely ajar, but open! From within came sounds of vigorous muscles at work. Prime strode in, angry, suspecting the identity of the intruder.

Annuncio met Prime's glance with a sullen, covert tenacity of purpose that proved to Prime that the coarse woman was not acting for herself, but under orders from Kate. This further infuriated Prime.

"What are you doing here?" Prime demanded, using English instead of Spanish, as her resentment welled up.

Annuncio had hold of one of Prime's prized Navajo blankets. She flapped it boldly. A bit of priceless ancient fringe flipped off at her violent effort. Prime's anger boiled, as Annuncio said:

"Eet is mucho dustee. I clean by order of Señora Fraz-er."

"An order? No one gives orders here but me." Losing control of herself, Prime clutched at the blanket.

Annuncio muttered, spat, jerked the blanket away from Prime. The girl, like a catamount, leaped for a peg over the fireplace, tore down a fancy quirt and whirled it aloft to strike. Annuncio, dropping the blanket, ran, screaming that she had been lashed.

Prime, knowing she had made a fool of herself, threw down the quirt. Outside Annuncio bawled, Kate placated, Frazer growled. Then he called her.

The girl, her heart hard, went to face him, but with a smile, to try, if possible, to soften him.

Frazer yelled at her as she came. "Prime, what do you mean, lashing this woman, quarreling with servants like you was a Mexican hussy. I won't have it."

Kate was smiling behind their backs; Annuncio grinned.

"Father"—Prime's anger flashed for the first time at him, instead of at Kate—"some respect is due me."

"Earn it, then, by acting like a lady."

"Does she," asked Prime, pointing to Annuncio, "claim I quirted her?"

"Yes."

"She lies!" declared Prime, in a voice ringing clear and firm.

Annuncio sobbed and began to back away.

Frazer, checked, said: "Prime, I never knew you to lie. Tell me all."

Kate's fingers stole over the back of his chair and rested on his hot cheek. He reached up to take them in his fevered palm. Prime, noting it,

thought how the supplanter could creep in between and draw her father deeper into her net. Kate, as if divining the girl's thought, sent a mean, evil smile over Ed's head, that he did not see. It said to Prime plainly:

"See, I am first in his heart. You are only what I permit you to be."

"Dad"—Prime's voice trembled—"I never hit her. I only flourished my quirt. She ran."

"Flourished it?" asked Kate, catching at the unhappy word.

"Yes; if she says more, she lies."

But Kate, exasperatingly cool, replied:

"You'll be calling me a liar next."

"I may," answered Prime hotly. "That is——" She held back the rest.

"Prime, girl," exclaimed Frazer, "stop!"

Kate's cool hand came over his spluttering lips, as if she wished to restrain him from saying too much.

Prime, wild with anger now, pointing at Annuncio's shrinking form, cried: "If she's been quirted, let her show the marks."

For an instant the plotting woman and her tool seemed to shrink, for this demand might result in an inspection, in which the truth would come out. Annuncio hung her head.

Kate, quicker to wit, said: "Ed, after lashing Annuncio, she would make her bare her shoulders before you. Shame on her!"

Frazer caught at that straw. "Prime, you hadn't ought to ask her to uncover."

"I'll look at her myself, inside," Kate said, drawing Annuncio indoors.

Prime, her back stiff with anger, turned away from her father. He tipped the bottle once, twice, thrice, as they waited. Then Kate came out to

report quietly, as if trying to stave off further trouble.

"The lash marks are not severe. Let's have no more fuss."

"That's a lie," Prime retorted, wheeling upon Kate. Without a word to her father she whipped indoors.

Little Augur told Big Jim of it all, as they sat on the stone seat in the upper garden that night. Jim tried to smooth things.

"Prime, girl, don't you see that by flarin' up you play Kate's own hand for her, supposin' she's bent on doin' what you say, makin' trouble between you and Big Augur."

"What do you mean, Jim?" Prime asked, anxious to get any clew to peace.

"Why, every time you make war medicine an' ghost dance, she just settles back on her ha'nches an' lets you ramble. Then yore dad feels like you was to blame, entire."

"But what can I do? Let her make me out a liar and a brute?"

"Sit deep in th' saddle an' ride, like I taught you when you wasn't bigger'n knee-high to a grasshopper."

Prime snuggled close to her comforter and promised not to let her temper "run on the rope" so much. Jim patted her head soothingly. They heard Vangie calling.

"Prime, yo-ho, Prime!" Vangie's voice was calling through the starlit night. She came running, exclaiming excitedly: "What do you s'pose? Give a guess!"

"What, Vangie?" asked Prime kindly, for she was too just to blame Vangie for her mother's faults.

"We're to have a party—sure 'nuff merrymakin'.

Dad Frazer, he says it. Maw proposed it for yore birthday."

"There, you see, she's makin' up," Jim whispered to Prime.

"Miss Prime, I heard they said you clouted that black Annuncio. I don't b'lieve it. She lied, not you." Then Vangie began to hug Prime.

Prime felt a sob fighting its way into her throat. This touch of sympathy melted her from her hard mood toward her father. She saw in the party a peace offering and went to her father at once. Kate was all smiles, and Frazer was pleased at the idea that seemed to have blown away all domestic storm clouds.

"We can't be dull here always," Ed said. "An' I want all the folks to meet my wife before beef round-up. It's slack time now, an' we sure can get a whoppin' crowd. It'll be a moonlight dance out here under the galleries. The hands can drag up white sand from the creek, that clean, heavy stuff that won't whiff all up. Nice t' dance on, when packed. I'll get the band from Willow Springs and go th' limit on fixin's. It'll be yore birthday party, Little Augur."

Prime felt a deepening glow of pleasure. She never had had a real big party, all her own, Bar Six really owed a dance to the neighborhood, and Prime let herself be persuaded into cheerful acceptance because it was a peace offering, she felt.

Frazer drew no caste lines in sending out his invitations. The call sped up and down the long trails by word of mouth: "Bar Six gives a birthday party to Little Augur. Come and bring your feet."

Bar Six rose to the occasion. The big wagon shed was cleared for the use of the Mexican retainers, for their hospitality embraced all their friends for miles around. Frazer led the grand

march there with Annuncio, to honor them. Bar Six riders danced with pretty Mexican girls, no less than with the American lassies. Pete Brennan and Mrs. Brennan were there, with Harry, their eldest son. As the Brennans made much of Kate, Frazer was pleased, for that meant that she "belonged" now, for the Brennans and the Frazers were the region's leaders.

Prime was radiant as she waltzed with Harry Brennan. When Jim claimed her for a dance, Prime said to him, as Harry left a last warm compliment in her ear: "My feet are light as tumbleweeds to-night, Big Jim."

"Yore face is as pretty as a windflower!"

"Shucks, Jim!" she protested, yet well pleased, for her glass had given back an enchanting picture of a girl in black and yellow, a black Spanish lace scarf floating from her graceful shoulders.

Carl and Vangie strolled by and laughingly greeted her.

"Tres, he's got Vangie roped, sure," Jim whispered to Prime.

"Yes, an' her heart's warm, too," Prime answered, as the band struck up "Rio Grande Belles."

Jim claimed her for that schottish. He was a natural dancer, who felt the lure of the dance. He had taught Prime most of her dance steps, giving her first lesson when she was ten. They danced together perfectly. A hum of admiration followed them, as they seemed to float soundlessly along, yet there was one discordant note.

"They sure drift fine an' dandy," honest Pete Brennan said. Pete, Mrs. Brennan, Kate and Frazer were watching them.

Then Kate let drip her acid. "Yes, but Prime ought to be honoring men from other outfits, not giving all her time to Bar Six men."

"I want my gal to be good to my hands," Frazer answered.

"Sure! Bar Six hands deserve it," sage old Pete replied.

"But Prime might give more attention to your Harry," Kate managed to say into Mrs. Brennan's ear, thus winning her completely.

Pete might have said more in support of Prime and Ed, but he felt a nudge from Mrs. Brennan's foot and, valuing domestic peace, took refuge in much smoke, thinking: "My old woman must have an idea."

They danced the night away, the day in. Prime was happy. The party had been a huge success. Scores of handsome men had showered her with compliments. With the dawn, as she sought a cup of coffee, Harry Brennan found Prime.

Showing his white teeth behind the droop of his new black mustache, Harry said: "I'm goin' to stay a while. Your dad, he knew my heart was wounded by you, an' he asked me to stay."

Jim, standing apart, had heard, Prime noted, and he paused in his munching of a sandwich, then ate anew. Harry, slender, with rounded cheeks, crisply curling hair, warmest of brown eyes, was good to look upon. His hands were slender, his body supple, strong.

"Sure glad to have you stay on my own account," Prime said honestly. She always had liked Harry. He was impulsive, direct-dealing, able to shoot and fight his way through, if called upon—Pete Brennan all over, underneath the soft beauty his mother had given him at birth.

Jim came to them, and Harry and Jim started to talk cattle, as the guests made ready to speed homeward over the long trails, for by now the

company was thinning out. Pete and Mrs. Brennan went with the Circle Diamond Tail outfit. Jim took Harry under his care and had his horse stabled. The two were good friends.

Prime knew at once why Harry Brennan was staying. He had been rather spoiled by women. He never had paid direct court to Prime before. Kate had made it easy for Frazer to think of inviting Harry by saying to him:

"It will wear off the bad effect of Prime's not dancing much with Harry if you ask him to visit here."

Frazer had taken the bait, and by the day after the party, he thought that he had originated the idea. He was bent upon making a match of it, but so clumsy were his plans that Big Jim saw through them, as did many others. As Jim saw Prime and Harry ride away together, he felt his heart contract, but he had to do them the justice to reflect:

"They're made for each other; young, handsome, hard riders, with plenty of savvy on cattle." With a sigh he went about his own work.

Kate now was nice to Prime, thinking to further the match. If only she could marry Prime off, link up the Frazer with the Brennan influence! Prime was too honest to draw Harry on, just to hear "I love you" from a new pair of masculine lips. She kept him on a friendship footing. But Harry was too seasoned a wooer to let any girl make small of him as a lover. He was persistent, smiling his way into her outer defenses calmly, purposefully.

The climax came at the end of a day's hunt on Tag Blow Creek, thirty miles below Bar Six. Frazer had organized the hunt "to give Harry his chance," as he sagely whispered to Kate on the

way down. Jim Easton had declined an invitation to hunt, pleading press of work up near Dead Hole. Prime was not sorry Jim kept away that day, of all others, for she felt the crisis was at hand.

The dogs had started a cougar. Curiously enough, Frazer and Kate lost the chase, leaving Harry and Prime to make the running alone. The yelping told of quarry at bay in a hackberry thicket. Side by side, Bucky, carrying Prime, and Harry's big chestnut, raced to the kill. Prime burst through the encircling brush in the lead and, without checking Bucky, whirled down with her six-gun, just as the "lion," with a great arching spring, left the tree. The bullet caught him in mid-air, right where his snubbed nose and gray-green eyes triangled together. As Bucky slithered to a circus stop, Harry checked his horse, and the dogs closed in to worry the convulsively jerking cougar's form.

Harry expressed his admiration: "Nice shot, Prime! My, but you c'n ride. Oh, Prime, girl——"

As she swung down afoot, her question cut him short. "What cowgirl can't ride, Harry?" She was hoping to head him off.

"Miss Prime, oh, Prime, girl!" His rich voice was vibrating with manly feeling. It had come, then! As the dogs worried the dead lion, Harry was off his horse, at her side. He took her hand in his, as she finished holstering her still warm gun. She did not draw the hand away, for Harry was speaking, pleading. "Prime, do I have to say I love you? Ever'one does. But I want you for my very own."

"Harry, Harry, I'd rather you didn't ask me."

"Prime, sweet, don't stop me now." He had an arm about her waist.

Prime was moved deeply. Harry was a good boy; he loved her, was handsome, brave, a gallant rider, a true range-maid's mate. And yet——

"Harry, please don't say anything more."

"I must; I'm yore lover, Prime. Love me a little?" His voice was soft, winning, dreamy in its ardent insistence.

"I'd like to say yes, Harry. I like you, yes, but don't feel heart's love. Let's stay friends."

His arm fell from her waist, and he held her candid, pure gaze. "Is there any one else, Prime?"

"No; my heart's free."

"Can I hope?"

"No; boy, I'm not flirting you along to keep you dangling. I'm honest, square, like you'd want your sister to be."

He hung his handsome head, was silent for ten heartbeats. Then he smiled again wistfully. "But I'll always love you, Prime. Can I kiss yore hand, just to have something to remember?"

"Oh, kiss my cheek, Harry. I'd love to have it so. I want to remember your goodness always and keep your friendship close."

He started, as though cut with steel, but he put his cold, white lips to her hot, flushed cheek and drew away. Even in his heartbreak, for he knew that that kiss was his reward, his sole reward, he still thought of her and whispered that the others were coming. A touch of hand he gave, as she went into her saddle. Harry gave the call to guide them in.

Kate and Frazer studied them, as they reached the little open space, but Prime and Harry gave no sign of the agitation that had been theirs so recently. It was while they were riding toward home that the truth came out. Harry turned to Frazer, as they neared Bar Six. "I'm ridin' to-morrow."

"So soon? Oh, stay a while more."

Harry shook his head.

Kate was silent. She knew that her plan to marry Prime off had failed.

Harry rode with the dawn, escorted a way by Big Jim Easton, for politeness sake. Prime, from her window, saw him go, lightly swaying in his saddle, the beau ideal of the swift-riding plainsman. His last word to her the night before had been: "Keep a tiny corner in yore heart for me, Prime, sweet."

Prime rode early next day for Circle Dot X, telling her father: "I've got to work on my own place; been pleasuring too long. I'm a cow woman now."

She wondered that he did not answer her banter. When she was gone, he went indoors, depressed. Bucky carried her away; for the last time, she was to think before the day closed! What was on Frazer's conscience?

The day before, just after Harry Brennan had gone, Kate and Frazer had ridden toward Circle Dot X. There was a nice spring that way, which never had been quarreled over by either ranch. It was about on the line. But on that ride Frazer thought of it and went to see if it was flowing. He found that a favorite black bull of his had just been gored to death by a red bull of Prime's. The two bulls had fought for the use of the spring by their respective herds.

Frazer, angered to lose that fine black leader and egged on by Kate, had brusquely ordered some of his Mexicans, working near by, to run a fence, so Prime's cattle would be cut off from the spring, while Bar Six cattle could get at it down the little draw from the north. Frazer intended to countermand that order, after a talk with Prime, perhaps.

He knew his natural obstinacy had carried him beyond bounds.

Later in the day, when he found the fence had been put up, Frazer's anger had cooled, and he was inclined to take it down. He said to Kate: "Bar Six never did claim that spring entire. It's really just over the line on Circle Dot X."

But Kate countered: "Let the fence stay up. There are more springs. The fence will keep Prime's fightin' bull from killing more of your Spanish heavies."

And so Frazer, the smart of his loss irking him, had let Kate wheedle him away from the fence.

Kate clinched it. "If Prime don't like the fence, she'll say so."

That was why Frazer felt guilty, as Prime rode away. He spoke to Kate, like an unruly boy asking a favor. "I think we ought to take that fence down. She'll see it to-day. Le's ride over there, Kate."

"If he goes alone, he'll weaken," Kate said to herself. So she agreed quickly.

Frazer, determined to have backing, asked Jim to ride with them. Jim saddled Brilar, and soon the three rode forth. Jim was coldly silent. Frazer knew Jim had heard about the fence, and he tried to get in the first word.

"We're ridin' to that spring above Circle Dot X."

"So?" Jim's voice was decidedly chilly.

"I ordered that fence up to keep Prime's fightin' bulls off."

"So?" Jim's frigidity did not melt.

"I ought to talked to you first, I s'pose," Frazer replied placatingly.

"Not necessary; yo're boss." The words of Jim implied gravest disapproval.

"We've got to assert our rights," said Kate, intending to stiffen Frazer.

"Some folks' rights are others' wrongs," Jim answered, perhaps the first time he ever had answered a woman other than gently.

They rode in silence then, and when they loped down the little slope leading to the spring and reined in beside the new fence, it was to find Prime on the other side, her brows knit in a pronounced frown. She lifted her eyes, and Frazer shrank from what he saw there. She spoke, and Kate Frazer rejoiced to hear what wrath was expressed by the girl.

"Dad, you sent me away with a kiss last night an' a kind word this morning. I ride here to find—this, the first fence on these ranges, put up on a line between neighbors, and it is between you an' your only child."

"Prime, I didn't mean it thataway."

"No, you didn't but some one else did!" Prime was pointing a gloved finger at Kate, whose face went red.

"She put this into yore heart, dad. She did it. She's tryin' to drive me out. I guess she's done it."

"Done it, Prime?"

"Yes. The spring's on my land; let that go, but——"

"The spring's on my land," exclaimed Frazer suddenly, for now he had a point to quarrel over.

"No, it's on mine. I know where the line runs. Old Pappy Yeager's been on this ranch many's th' year, dad. He says it's on mine."

"Why, Kate told me——"

"A lie, same's she has before." The girl's voice was very bitter. Prime felt that it had come to a final test, the show-down.

Kate Frazer, cool inside, outwardly angered, came

back with: "A lie? You see, Ed, she's bound to make me a liar."

"Prime, beg yore mother's pardon."

"My mother's!" There was a long pause, during which the girl's gaze held that of the other woman firmly. "My mother is dead. That woman—she's a stranger in my dear mother's place."

Frazer's face went white. Then a red flood of anger surged over it. He stiffened in his saddle and raised his right hand threateningly.

"Prime, she's my wife."

"Keep her, then. Good-by, but remember there are two cow women on this range, and one has got to go."

She twisted Bucky about. Frazer called after her:

"What do you mean, Prime?"

"Mean?" she asked, wheeling the horse again. "This: I won't stay in the same house with her, nohow. I'm goin' to live on Circle Dot X an' run my own brand. I'll return Bucky to you and send for just my own things. She's managed it well and drove me out. Good-by, Jim."

She was gone, and they glanced at each other. Jim's lips were compressed sharply; Kate was smiling scornfully; Frazer was breathing heavily.

"She's got a girl's whim. Bar Six will look mighty good to her in a week," Kate remarked lightly.

"Yes, only a girl's whim. Let's ride," answered Frazer.

"Reckon Prime means it," was Jim's curt comment, and they rode.

Arriving at the ranch, José Almonté brought out the mail bags proudly. Frazer sorted the letters. He flipped a strange-looking one to Jim, who read it, while Frazer fidgeted with one from Beard &

Flynt, the big cattle dealers. Jim's look became resolute, as he finished reading. The letter was from Teresa Bolton.

Will visit Bar Six now. My parents have died. I have retired from business and want a long rest, outdoors mostly. Will be at Willow Springs two days after this. Meet me.

"Mr. Frazer!" Jim's voice was hard, sharp.

"Why—what, Jim?" Frazer was aroused at that unwonted tone.

"I want my time!"

"Jim, you don't mean——"

"I do. I'm ridn' to-night!"

Frazer hung his head.

Kate's voice rose: "Bar Six can live without any one hand." This emphasis on "hand," denying Jim a farewell on the basis of his having made good as foreman, cut Easton deeply. He wheeled and went to pack. Frazer stumbled indoors to make out Jim's reckoning.

Two hours later, mounted on Brilar, his war bags packed, his check for back pay tucked in his hip pocket, Jim rode for Willow Springs. Jarvis Larrabee was to keep his dunnage in store until called for. Jim left with no word of explanation for Jarve and the boys. Frazer would have extended a hand in farewell, but Kate edged in between, with a low taunt, and so those two men, whose souls were knit so closely that nothing could come between, it had seemed, parted without a word, merely curt nods and a wave of cold hands.

CHAPTER XVI

BRAZOS GAINS GROUND

FRAZER suspected Jim's going had to do with Prime's absence, and his, Frazer's, injustice to her, but he was too stubborn to own it. If Frazer felt resentment against Kate, she cured that by sliding the handy bottle to him and coaxing him to "take a nip for your nerves." That, and a black cigar that so mysteriously soothed him, quieted him for the night.

On the morrow Frazer hired Larrabee as foreman, leaving him to pick his own assistant. Jarvis Larrabee scratched his honest, loyal head and went away, well pleased at his promotion. Kate was suited with that promotion, for she knew that Jarve had defects that would lead to trouble, and then perhaps Brazos could step in. She dared not propose him for foreman yet, but soon, perhaps.

Larrabee, bursting in among the hands at the corral, told the news and at once picked Silent for straw boss. The men were smoothing off bumps in the dispositions of bad actors among the saddle bands, making ready for the hard work on the beef round-up later.

Jarve addressed Silent: "You slab-sided son of a wolf, I name you top hand of Bar Six. I warn all that I throw a long rope an' seldom miss. Gimme a ton o' respect to th' acre, as yore foreman."

"I knew you'd be boss, if ever Jim Easton left," Silent replied; "but I never thought I'd be made top hand over this bunch of pink-eared Navajo sheepherders. Now easy, boys, on gun plays. I'm speaking by way of hyperbolical cussiwick, all

right. I'm vice president of this low-flung, ornery prairie-dog village, on one considerwhichin, an' that's that all you coffin-nail vaporizers engage not to talk, unless I'm silent."

"Wants to hog th' atmosphere all th' times," Rancocus Al yowled, and then they closed in to drag him to the bunk house and toss him in a blanket.

Jarvis Larrabee—Jarve for short—rode to Tin Cow in a few days, to get a hand to make up for Easton's going and the resulting promotions. Frazer, instigated by Kate, had ordered Jarve to see Brazos and thank him for preventing the hold-up by Kid from Arizone. Jarve had no personal reason for disliking Brazos.

Brazos, coached in advance by a note from Kate, sent Jarve away with plenty of good cigars, a good meal and a good opinion of Brazos, as he then was. Jarve found Brazos enjoying the good will of Tin Cow for having killed Kid, and there was a plan to make Brazos marshal.

This, reported to Frazer, was enlarged upon by Kate. Frazer would have had Jarve take Jim's room in the big house, but Kate opposed.

"We let one foreman sleep in the house, and it gave him big ideas. Let Jarve fill the foreman's bunk among the boys."

That arrangement pleased Jarve, who had had a horror of "putting on dog, like Jim did," and it also left vacant Jim's room, in case Kate got Brazos to come on at Bar Six later.

"So Brazos is to be marshal?" Frazer asked Jarve that night. "Well, he's got the backbone. He got that road agent easy. Maybe we were a leetle harsh on Brazos a while back, eh, Kate?"

"Yes," replied Kate, tossing her handsome head. "Brazos might've needed watching once, like others.

I've heard old-time cowmen say the worst bad men made the best marshals and ranch foremen."

"I admit that. Take me. I never dodged trouble as a yearlin', but I'm plumb gentle now."

"You never pulled a gun without cause," Jarve said.

"I knew. Well, let Braz pass. Get a new hand?"

"No; we only need one more for the round-up."

"Why not try Brazos? He's a good hand," Kate said.

"Aw, he's got other business—it would be like a road runner corralin' a rattler with cactus spikes," Jarve declared.

"He might come out, but eatin'-bar business will be some dull till the round-ups swing over that side o' Bar Six," said Frazer, falling in with Kate's view.

By now he was apt to take any of her sly suggestions and adopt them for his own. The steady drip, drip, drip of too much alcohol and the insistent gnawing of those strangely potent black cigars on his nerves had reduced Ed Frazer to a condition of flabby reasoning power, quite different from his former strong-willed self.

"I'll try to get him," replied Jarve and went away, good, easy man, well pleased with himself at pleasing his employer and his employer's wife.

Later that day, Kate went for a ride. Frazer was busy with round-up plans, so he did not accompany her, and she was glad. She wanted to ride alone, to think, to plan. Thunder, sent so many times toward Dead Hole, turned toward Circle Dot X, the first stage on the journey thither. Kate, intent, did not notice the horse's direction until she was within sight of her old home, and then she reined in Thunder with a sharp jerk, that made him wince.

Kate quirted him over the head with slashing strokes.

Thunder, as the lash cut that tender place, where eye and lid meet, started to buck. Kate handled him superbly and soon reduced the horse to sweating impotency. Suddenly she became aware that Prime, on a cast-off pony of Circle Dot X, was riding for her and must have viewed, as she had approached, the whole miserable scene.

Prime's eyes were hard with anger. "I won't have old Thunder cut to ribbons thataway."

"Whose hoss is it?" Kate demanded, raising the quirt anew.

"I don't care whose; you can't abuse him thataway."

"A hoss' rider is judge of when to use quirt or spur."

"When the rider is a man or woman—not a beast."

"I'll cut him to ribbons, if I want to."

"Yes, yo'd do it! For Thunder's sake I'll be still."

Kate laughed, showing every white, even tooth. "Yo're soft!"

"Yo'd never be. Get yore way, no matter what it cost man or beast."

"Yes, that's my way. I'm not soft like you, or like yore sniffin' sick-an'-die-quick mother, either. Yo're——"

The insulting epithet died on her tongue. Swish! Prime, swift as lightning, leaned far over in her saddle, and her quirt left its weal on the rounded cheek of the sneering supplanter, to wipe out the deadly insult.

Prime let the reddened lash slide through her fingers, as she drew it toward her with a quick snap; then, as black anger again and again sent

tides of glowing hate over the other's darkened cheeks, Prime threw the quirt from her with a bitter laugh.

"Bah! I couldn't use it after it has even touched your flesh."

"You'll pay for this! I'll use you as I've used Thunder." Kate was choking, one hand at her throat, as if to tear open her dress to get more air. "I'll pay you off, triple measure!"

Then she struck spurs to Thunder and was gone. Once she wheeled, and Prime thought she meant to draw her gun, but she turned the horse again and soon was far away. The reason for her decision not to shoot was soon apparent, for in the distance Prime saw a buckboard approaching.

After a moment, she was able to make out that the driver was Jim Easton, and she gave a little sobbing cry of inner joy, for she had been lonesome for Big Jim, without knowing what it was that she yearned for. Now she knew, as he came toward her. Beside Jim sat a woman, with a mass of blond hair, piled up under a tartan-plaid tam-o'-shanter, very much askew. Her head kept bobbing about all the time, to enable her quick eyes to take in the details of the landscape.

As they drove closer, and as Jim was nodding and smiling to Prime, the girl heard the lady remark to Jim very positively:

"I don't know the name of that woman that passed us, but, by her black looks, I'd say she was a hussy."

With a twinge of heart Prime noted how beautiful was this well-formed, fair woman. She could not help but wonder who she was, and what she was to Jim, who plainly was enjoying her company to the full, as she fairly bubbled with vitality in her keen interest in scenes new to her experience.

CHAPTER XVII

CLAY FOR THE POTTER

UNWITTINGLY Prime had given Kate just the weapon she needed to win a point, a big point. Perhaps only that had kept Kate from drawing her gun on Prime in that first paroxysm of rage at being quirted. Hiding her anger for the time, she rode home. The quirt cut passed as a cut from a cat-claw twig, until after the evening meal. Kate sat long at table. Frazer, held to her side by custom, waited. Vangie, yawning, went away.

Frazer, yearning for his big easy-chair, the bottle, the cigar, that he so craved, fidgeted. She knew he was eager to be gone; so she kept him dawdling. She had studied out his every appetite and knew how to use each for her fell purposes. He could stand the strain of waiting no longer.

"Kate, what's wrong? You act like a mired calf."

"Nothing, Ed! I'm sorry—that's all."

"Sorry! Come, Kate, tell a fellow." He reached out to take her hand, that she let droop, wearily. She sighed deeply and he made another effort, got the hand, as she knew he would if she made it hard, and he patted it.

"Yes, Ed, sorry. I made a mistake marrying you."

"A mistake! Don't yo' still love me, Kate? What've I done?"

"You done nothing, but I see how it will all end."

"End!" He came around to her side, getting an arm about her.

"Yes, end——"

"Meanin' to quit me, Kate?" he asked in anguished tones.

"No, not unless you drive me out!"

"Drive! You ain't loco?"

"No; but, Ed, you'll cling to yore own flesh and blood. I'm only the second wife; she's yore daughter."

"Kate, what has she done? Have yo' met her?" His face clouded with black anger.

"Give me a portion; let me go; Annuncio'll keep house for you."

"Kate, what has she said?"

"Said! I could stand the lash of her tongue, but it is when she uses her quirt——" She pointed to the cut on her cheek.

Frazer's wrath exploded in a series of oaths. "If she was a man, I'd kill her for that! No one can quirt my wife an' get away with it——"

"But she's yore daughter. You'll stick to her at last and throw me off." With level insistency she clung to the latter point.

"I—throw you off? Never!"

"Not right now, perhaps, when I'm attractive; but when I'm old, she'll come in between. You might ride into a dog hole to-morrow an' get killed, and I'd be thrown out. I'd get a widow's mite, but she'd get Bar Six an' romp all over yore grave, enjoyin' the money."

"Kate, I'll make a will soon."

"No, don't, Ed. A will is unlucky, I've heard. Let it rest. It don't matter 'bout me. I got a little saved up, but, of course, there's poor li'l Vangie."

"Yes, there is Vangie. She's my daughter now, too."

"Ed"—reaching up her arms to him and drawing his lips down to her own, that knew how to call up the worst in the man—"Ed, yo're too good. Let

it rest as it is. Neither Vangie or I'll kick if we get set out on th' prairie. An' then, nothing may happen to you. Yo're a big, strong man yet."

"Kate, I'll make a will in your favor, as soon as I can get over to Willow Springs. I should've done it at first, Kate, girl. Yo're all I've got now, an' I mean to do what's right by you."

"Don't cut Prime off—she's yore daughter, if she did say you was a soft-haired fool for marryin' me."

"When did she say that?"

"When she was a-lashin' at me with th' quirt. I'd whopped her, but I held in. I thought: 'After all, she's Ed's daughter, an' I better not be too harsh.'"

"Yo'll be paid a hundred times for that bit o' fo'bearance," he said, and his deep earnestness told her that he was thoroughly won over to her side. "I'll make my will so that you get all but enough to make it so she can't claim I overlooked her entirely, and so get up a law case."

"And in case o' need I'd not see yore daughter want, Ed," she replied, with a final touch of hypocrisy.

He patted her head, and a great sigh came from his deep chest. Then she got up and put her arm about his waist and urged him to go outside. He went, and she put the bottle at his elbow on the table and opened a box of those black cigars for him. Then she wisely left him. Ed's cigar glowed far into the night. Kate did not come out to him again, for she was pondering a note that Vangie had left on her dresser: "Maw: Play heepokrite all you like. I'm going with one I love."

Kate thought Vangie had eloped with Carl Trescott, but she heard Carl singing to the hands in the bunk house below. With whom, then?

"Little fool, let her go! I'll feather my nest.

But she may be only off on some madcap prank, like she's done before." Presently Kate went calmly to bed.

Next morning Frazer said he was going to Willow Springs to make the will. Kate shrewdly opposed this, just enough, however, to confirm him in his obstinate purpose to do it. As Frazer waited for Tom Tucker to be brought up, he got out a black cigar, eagerly bit into it, and lighted up. He bent over in the saddle to kiss Kate good-by.

"Something 'bout those cigars I like. Have José get more when he rides to Tin Cow for the mail to-day."

"All right! Those cigars sure are he-man cigars, Ed, just what a big fellow like you ought to smoke," she answered admiringly. "Bet they taste good to you."

In the mail for Brazos went a note that had this postscript: "Have your Chinese cook dope six more boxes of cigars—stronger. He's got the habit now."

Kate, in her preoccupation over her plans to get the will, had not told Frazer about having seen Easton drive a strange woman toward Prime's; nor had she told Frazer of the note which Vangie had left.

Remembering the latter now she inquired if Vangie had been seen. No one had glimpsed the girl. The scheming woman, as a final thought, hit upon the idea that Vangie might have had a recurrence of her hero worship of Easton, who had gone toward Prime's the day before, driving that beautiful city woman. Kate hit upon a plan for getting news of them all. She sent for Carl Trescott, and when the boy came, addressed him more kindly than Carl remembered to have heard her speak to him before.

"Carl, do you know Vangie has gone away?"

"To Willow Springs on another visit?" The candor of his question showed he knew nothing of her whereabouts.

"No, just sloped."

"Not gone—entire?" His face was blank.

"I don't know, Carl. Vangie was once plumb loco after Jim Easton."

"But Jim never soft-soaped her."

"So they say, but Vangie's a fool over good-looking men. That's why she likes you, Carl," Kate said, bantering shrewdly. "I think she's at Circle Dot X. Ride over and see."

Carl went, after Kate had cautioned him not to tell the hands that Vangie had gone. Soon Carl was jogging his horse, Sour Face, down the trail. The boy was thinking deeply. The going of Prime had been a severe shock to the men. Vangie's going would add to the ill-feeling that was gathering behind Jarvis Larrabee's curtain of good nature, for Vangie, despite her soft and easy way of picking up males, was a favorite.

When the trail swung aside for Circle Dot X, Carl saw in the distance two horses cropping the grass, close to some boulders. Every little while the horses would throw up their heads, with the motion that told of bridle reins dragging. So the riders must be close at hand. Carl rode toward them. Sour Face was greeted with persuasive nickers. Seated on some boulder fragments, that had broken off the main masses, were Vangie and another woman. Vangie did not cease to chew her gum, but out of a puckered corner of her mouth, she said:

"Carl, you triflin' no-'count puncher, you! What're you riding this way so early? Ain't there no wickedness to be done over onto Bar Six, that you can be spared?"

This sounded so natural, so Vangielike, that Carl grinned and swung down, his hat off. He came toward them stiffly, and the closer he came the more he stared at the other woman, who got up and coolly offered the boy her hand. Then Carl spoke.

"If it ain't the Adequate Lady!"

"Is that what you men called me?"

"Sure did, ma'am. Well, now, did you tell Vangie all 'bout that time we had in Omaha?"

"Of course she did, you triflin' cow hand," Vangie said. "I'm livin' over with Prime and Miss Bolton; she's goin' t' stay a while, and Jim Easton, he's our cow hand. No outfit ever had a better."

"I've a mind to pull my freight my ownself," Carl said soberly. "I'd work for Miss Prime for nothin' a month an' board myself."

"Carl, you'll win my heart yet!" Vangie got up and pinched his ear, while Miss Bolton smiled on them.

Carl rode away good-naturedly and at Bar Six made his report. Kate tried again to set him against Jim by remarking about Vangie's proximity to Easton, but Carl held his peace, wondering at her insistence. As he went away, he found it impossible to cast aside all of the irritating impression which her words had made.

CHAPTER XVIII

ASSISTING CUPID

WHILE Vangie and Teresa Bolton rode, Easton worked about Circle Dot X corral, long dilapidated. He had had a man bring Brilar down from Willow Springs, and now he felt somewhat at home. He would have been entirely at ease, if Prime had not developed a great skill in cross-examination. To-day he got away from her by pleading that the corral needed repairs.

Jim Easton had given Prime a mild version of his reasons for quitting Bar Six; but so far he had given no reason for his desire to remain at Circle Dot X. Prime knew he was letting chances for profitable work go by. She wanted to probe his reason, and now she found it convenient to stroll down to the corral, much to Jim's alarm. He feared she meant to ask questions. She climbed atop the rickety fence, where she could look down upon him, selecting one spot where the corral was least addicted to blind staggers.

"Jim, I wonder if it's best to let this fence fall down or burn it?" she asked.

"Prime, this fence'll lean against itself quite a while yet," he replied, relieved to find her starting to talk on what seemed like business.

"If I had capital I'd have a real corral, but I must go slow." She swung her heels against the shaky post under her.

"Prime," said Easton, whacking a staple, "how long are you goin' to stick here?"

"Till I move," she replied stubbornly, chin in air. "How long are you?"

"Me! I'm on my vacation. Got a right to one?"

"Yes, Jim, and I'm right glad yo're spending it here. But you keep working."

"Got to pay my board. I couldn't let you go on, without help over rough spots. I knew it would make talk if I came here myself, so, when Miss Bolton wrote, I got her to come as chaperone. Do you like her?"

"Oh, Jim," clapping her hands, "she's a success entire. I wish dad had seen her before—you know!"

Jim went to hammering again vigorously, and Prime walked away, thoughtful enough. Miss Bolton and Vangie came in just then, and Miss Bolton was overflowing with praises of the country. The amble on the staid old cayuse had been a real treat to her. She was a fair rider, for she had had saddle horses for sedate trips through city streets and parks and suburban byways. This free riding over the range country was fascinating to her, and she was tingling with the romance of it all. She called to Prime:

"Prime, sweet, I'm going to remain here till you grow tired of me and send me away, just as I wrote to Mr. Easton."

"Then you're elected for life," warmly replied Prime, going to the guest and placing her arm about her waist. Miss Bolton snuggled the girl to her. Vangie took the horses to the corral and remained there to banter with Jim. Prime and Miss Bolton walked toward the house.

"If I had a decent house here, I'd not mind so much," Prime apologized.

"I wouldn't worry about that. The house isn't the best, but time will fix that. I am accustomed to business, and I can see where your increase is coming from. Take care of your cattle, and they will build you a new house and furnish money for everything you need."

"I know, but it is hard to wait, after having had everything. I could have remained at Bar Six if I had put up with what the second wife did. But I wouldn't." As they entered the house, Miss Bolton laid off her hat and sagged into a chair, with a long sigh.

"I don't blame you for not remaining. From that glimpse I got of her, on my way here, I should judge she would make a good impression—from afar."

Prime said nothing to that, but her eyes and tight little smile showed that she appreciated that sort of left-handed praise for the object of her resentment.

"Prime," Miss Bolton asked with sudden force, "what are you going to do about Mr. Easton?"

"Do about him—I don't understand."

"Why, Prime, can't you see that he's in—he's just staying here to please you?"

"Well, what of that? I mean he has always been pleasing me, ever since I was a girl in gingham." Nevertheless Prime was blushing.

Miss Bolton bobbed her capable head and glanced out of the little window to where Jim was at work. Vangie was busy about the little hen house, where the few veteran hens, that went with the place, managed to eke out an existence without much attention.

"I wouldn't mind having such a handsome man please me once in a while," the Adequate Lady surprised Prime by remarking. "I never had a chance to be courted, and I believe I am beginning to have flighty notions. One thing I shall insist upon, the courtier must be a real man, handsome, forceful, big. I don't want any remnants or scantlings. I want a man."

"Well," said Prime faintly, "Jim is a man—all that."

"Did I mention Jim? I did not," she answered

somewhat sternly. "But there is something else I want to speak of. I can't just stay here and eat my head off. If I invest some money here, will you sell me half of this place, or an interest?"

"Why, Miss Bolton, you might lose the money."

"Well, there is more where that came from, my dear. I'll venture enough money to double your stock and give you a fine outfit of tools. You've said, if you could get in hay for extra feed, it would help a lot on a small place like this, since you could keep your stock contented nearer home."

"Yes, it would, I must confess."

"Then let me put in what you think is right. We can have an agreement drawn up in business fashion. Mr. Easton can go to town and buy in the stuff. We will hire him to work for us."

"Oh, won't that be fine!" Prime clapped her hands, for now all her supposed troubles were ended. She could have the improvements she wanted, have Jim near her, and Miss Bolton would remain. It seemed too good to be true, and, when Vangie came in with her hat full of eggs, she found the two knee-deep in plans for betterments.

That evening Jim was made acquainted with the terms of the partnership agreement, and he consented to remain as "Prime's hand," at the regular puncher wage, "until he could do better," adding this clause hypocritically, while Miss Bolton smiled behind her hand.

Two days later Jim and Prime and Vangie rode for Willow Springs, leaving Miss Bolton at home. She was not equal to the long ride, for she could not ride a horse spirited enough to make the trip in time for them to go and come in the period they could spare. The buckboard could not carry them and the things Jim was to order for the firm of Bolton &

Frazer. Easton was to arrange for a "bull-whacker" to bring it down in a freight ark later.

So Miss Bolton, who said she was pleased to be alone for a few days, but who really was somewhat nervous over it, smiled them on their way and became the sole occupant of Circle Dot X. By now the house was spotless indoors, and the ingenuity of the three women had added some comforts. Jim had cobbled together an easy cot for each of the three women, out of boards and rawhide, with plenty of blankets from his own store. He himself slept in his Mexican hammock swung to the corner of the shed behind the house.

The hours which Ed Frazer had spent going to and from Willow Springs had given him time to think over a great many things that had gone rather swiftly by him, during the past few weeks. As soon as he escaped from the sinister influence of Kate, his natural gentleness and goodness began to gain ground. So he felt rather ashamed of his condition. He realized that he had been drinking too much, also smoking too much.

By the end of the first day away from home he had smoked all of his black cigars, and the desire for tobacco he fought down, but the craving that went with it he could not explain. His thoughts went constantly to those black cigars and their satisfying aroma, but he could not explain their strange hold on him.

When the legal business had been transacted and the will delivered to him by Lawyer Hilton, Ed lounged about town a day, getting more and more control of himself. He made many good resolutions, and his yearning for the sight of Prime increased. He felt that, if he could see the girl alone and talk it all over with her, he could make his peace. Then would come the thought of his wife, and he

would remember that there could be no peace between the two.

Frazer was quite firm in his mind when he left Willow Springs. He determined to have it out with Kate, once and for all, and force her to make some sort of terms with Prime. He kept this resolve to himself and nursed it into what he took for full strength on the way home. But when he arrived at Bar Six, Kate, in a new house gown, that she had been preparing while he was away, met him and made him so comfortable that he put it off until a more fitting occasion, and she saw to it that he drank a round or two and smoked a couple of those soothing cigars, and somehow the spell of her handsome person grew upon him again. She had just such a meal as he relished, and the house was so cool; all in it ran so nicely. Later that night he gave her the will, and, after she had read it, she kissed him fervently, and he felt repaid.

He awakened next morning with a dull headache—something new to him. He filled his pocket with the black cigars and called for Tom Tucker. He wanted to ride some of the foggiess out of his brain. He rather dodged Kate and got away alone. The yearning for Prime was gnawing at his heart again, and he turned the horse toward where he thought he might see her.

Kate had not told him that others were at Circle Dot X besides Prime. Vangie's absence she had passed over slightly.

"She'll be back when she gets ready. Visiting somewhere, I'll be bound. She can take care o' herself."

Frazer kept Tom Tucker on a keen lope most of the way. He hesitatingly gentled the stallion down, as he approached the house. He was not sure but that he would go away without trying to see Prime.

He swung down and was trying to force himself toward the door. He had a nice little speech of apology all framed, and his black cigar was very tight in the middle of his jaw, pointing straight out, when he heard a voice from the little stable.

"You mean, spitting, rattling, squirming nasty, evil thing. I'll show you!"

There followed sundry thumps and the sound of dry buzzing. Frazer hastened to the door and saw a very handsome, energetic woman, with snappy blue eyes, smashing at a very big and much-mottled rattlesnake. She used a pitchfork handle capably.

"Come sneaking in here to catch a chicken, will you?" she asked, with a final jab that ended the fight. "There, next time you'll know better."

"He'll never know a thing, ma'am," Frazer found himself saying most unaccountably. "Not in this wicked world."

The handsome woman jumped, faced about, dabbed at her hair on either side, to make sure that none of its pretty ripples had gone awry. Assured as to that, she smiled at Frazer most engagingly, showing a set of perfect teeth and several bewitching dimples. Her face flushed from her effort in battle, and she was what any man would call attractive. She had brought from her armory of Eve a nice pink-and-gray gingham dress. Now the sun was peering through a crack in the walls of the stable, and it was lighting up her blond hair most effectively.

"Oh, I didn't think I had a spectator. You are Mr. Ed Frazer? I know you are, from Prime's description of you, sir."

"At yore service, ma'am," said Frazer, taking off his hat and making his very best bow. "Can you tell me if Miss Prime is at home? Are you her—her housekeeper—or what?"

"I am her partner, sir, not any one's house-keeper," she replied, very erect now and a bit angry.

"Oh, ma'am, I meant no harm," said Frazer humbly. "Did you say partner to Miss Prime?"

"Yes, sir. I am Miss Teresa Bolton, of Omaha, Nebraska." She was firm on the name of the State. "I am visiting Miss Frazer and—er—Mr. James Easton."

"Miss Bolton, the lady that helped Big Jim out of that fight and gave my cow hands such a good time! Indeed"—his old-time love of hospitality and gratitude to her was welling up within him with great force—"indeed, ma'am, you must come to my home to Bar Six, so I can return th' compliment. I press you to come, ma'am."

He was Ed Frazer now, anxious to please, to oblige. She took in every line of his handsome face, the droop of his long, blond mustache. Teresa Bolton was having queer sensations then, and she had to remind herself sharply that this was another woman's husband. He blundered on, sincerely enough:

"If I could see Miss Prime now, she would join me in asking you to Bar Six, ma'am."

"Miss Prime has gone to town for supplies. I have gone in with her here, for a time, at least. We have two hands, Jim Easton and Vangie Bradon. Now," her anger at the thought of Prime's wrongs boiling up suddenly, "let me say something, Mr. Frazer. You've got the finest daughter that ever drew breath, and you have used her worse than a dog. Oh, you are a cattle king out here and can make men run at your beck and call, but you can't make me stop telling what I think."

The blue eyes were snapping now, not snappy merely, and the blond head bobbed at him. He

backed out into the open, and she followed right after, throwing the pitchfork aside with a bang.

"How do you think the people around about will take it when they find out what has happened?"

This gave Frazer an uncomfortable few seconds, for he had not had the nerve to tell folks over in Willow Springs of his break with Prime. He had thought of it as something that would mend in time and pass off without too much public comment. But Frazer valued his position, as the real big man of the region, and he knew that in time his break with Prime must affect his prestige. The girl was the idol of the men of the long trails. It would take much to explain why she had suddenly quit Bar Six.

Miss Bolton would not let him rest, for, as he got to Tom Tucker and swung up, she kept right after him.

"You ought to be ashamed of yourself, letting that spiteful woman work¹ on you till you are separated from your daughter. Oh, if I had her here——"

Frazer set spurs to the astonished Tom Tucker and fled. Miss Bolton scurried indoors and suddenly found herself sobbing, and she could not have told why. She had thought she would meet Ed Frazer some day and be able to say some soothing things about Prime that would open the way for a reconciliation. But now she had done something foolish and girlish—sputtered at him like a scolding fury!

As for Ed Frazer, he went away with his head buzzing. This was the first real setback he had had in his course. Prime's obstinacy, Jim's silent disapproval, had only hardened his heart. But this handsome woman's sharp, yet just, tongue had cut into his soul, and he wanted to be away from that accusing voice and those flashing blue eyes.

On his arrival home, Kate met him with smiles and caresses, but he had a distaste for them both, and something in his manner must have showed it, for she drew away and studied him moodily. Presently, when he began to look about for something, she quietly slid the big bottle over to his elbow. He tilted it and found one of the big black cigars. He began to smoke. Kate tiptoed away and left him, smiling a bit at the back of the big man whom she still hoped to mold to her inner desires.

Kate Frazer did not give up the idea of having Brazos Kingston come to Bar Six as a hand. She managed it so that Frazer mentioned it again to Larrabee. Jarvis, when he went in to Tin Cow, found Brazos oddly easy to persuade. Kate's henchman merely stipulated that he be permitted to visit town once a week to see that his help ran the eating bar according to orders. Brazos brought with him for Frazer a box of those big black cigars. He was smoking one when he arrived. Ed noticed it at once and nodded pleasantly.

"Braz, where do you get those seegars?"

"These Black Dandies? I've the agency for this region."

"Order me a dozen boxes."

After a few days, Frazer drew Jarvis aside and asked him how Brazos was working. "Is he easy to work with?"

"Say, boss, a milder man never threw a rope. Good hand."

"H'm! Queer how we all had the idea once that he was crooked."

"He might've been. Men get over that, same's kids over measles."

"Well, Jarve, with round-up drawin' on, never ask a good cow hand where he comes from."

"My sentiments to a tee-o-ty, sir."

CHAPTER XIX

A LITTLE MISCHIEF

WHILE Jim bought supplies in Willow Springs for the new partnership, Prime and Vangie strolled about. From the east a happy band came riding in—Harry Brennan, leading C Diamond Tail's riders. Their long yell sounded: "Yii-i-i-ippity-ip-p-p!" Brennan, seeing the girls, brought the crowd to a dust-cloud stop.

"Sister Prime!" he called down. "I got good news."

"Sister! Say, Harry, how did you come into our family?"

"By the mitten route."

She knew he made fun to hide his hurt, and she gave him a heart-warming smile to show she realized.

"C Diamond Tail," he said, "gives a moonlight dance, a week from Friday, to inaugurate our new corral. Ever'body come an' shake a laig."

"We'll come. I've got company—nice Eastern lady."

"Shoo! Is she as pretty as Vangie?"

Vangie stuck out her lip. "Hank Brennan, stop!" she exclaimed, yet her smile showed she liked it.

"I'll kiss that dent in yore lower lip some day, Vangie. It's made for kissing." Then to Prime, as his punchers laughed and joked with ready Vangie, he said: "Bring all yore company. Bring yore dad, new maw—all Bar Six."

"I'm not at Bar Six," she answered, for she had forgotten for the moment her changed position.

"Not at Bar Six! C'n a man ask what's up?"

"Begging Vangie's pardon, too much stepmother."

"I'm stayin' with Prime." Vangie patted her shoulder.

"Thank you, Vangie," Prime murmured. The loyal girl's act showed all range land that she, at least, sided with Prime.

"Well, come, all o' you. I'll get word to Bar Six."

"Jim Easton, he's my hand on Circle Dot X. I've bought it. My Eastern lady guest is my partner."

At each statement Harry stared harder. "Well, yo've got a hand that's a whole outfit. I'd hire him away t' be C Diamond Tail's foreman, but he wouldn't come."

"How do you know?" she asked innocently.

"Shucks! Don't yo' know?"

"No; C Diamond Tail would fit Jim. I'll tell him about it."

Harry smiled, as did a number of his riders. A sudden notion came to Prime. She signed for Vangie to draw closer, got Harry to lean over, so she could hold him by the lapel of his holiday velvet coat, and whispered:

"Harry, manage it so my stepmother will be well squired at your dance. Keep her dancing."

"You must love her all of a sudden," he answered, his eyes twinkling.

"Never mind, Hankie, boy," Vangie put in. "Prime's got a plan."

"All right, girlies; plan away. Adios! We're riding with invites."

"Prime, you might done worse than take him," Vangie whispered, as Harry and his men whisked out of sight.

Up street Jim had appeared, steady on his strong shoulder a big load of stuff, as he headed

for the wagon yard, where was the freight outfit that was to carry their stuff to Circle Dot X. He waved a hand as he trudged.

"Harry isn't the last man baked out o' good clay," Prime answered, her voice trembling with some pent-up emotion that puzzled Vangie.

Returning home, the three dodged around Bar Six. Prime did not want to meet any one from there then. At Circle Dot X, Miss Bolton greeted the trio warmly and soon told them of Frazer's call, rather glossing over her own verbal tornado.

The girls at once began to work on Miss Bolton's feelings, telling her the C Diamond Tail dance would be a fine opportunity to meet all the worthwhile folks in the region.

On the evening of the dance, Teresa took out a blue party dress, showing just a glimpse of full throat, the elbow sleeves trimmed with lace. This was roped atop the horse, which they took along as common carrier. Presently they started toward Brennan's.

As at Bar Six, so at Brennan's, the dance was outside, with the moon to light up the scene. Hard-packed sand, pounded on to a smoothed spot behind the big house, gave ample room. The weather was perfect.

Harry had told his folks of Prime's leaving Bar Six. Mrs. Brennan tactfully gave Prime, Vangie, and Miss Bolton a room apart to dress in. The girls got her out of sight, in furtherance of their plan for mischief. Jim lost himself in the rollicking crowd of punchers that waited for the women to appear. Brazos was not with Bar Six. The boys told Jim that Brazos had been hired. Jim scowled, but held his tongue.

With her mouth full of hairpins and her facial muscles aching from holding them so long, Teresa

Bolton defended herself from the raillery of the girls, as she piled up her rippling corn-hued hair into a wonderfully effective knot. The fiddles tuned up!

While this was going on, Kate Frazer was the center of an admiring crowd of older men gathered about Frazer, all talking of the coming round-up. Compliments were showered upon Kate in a way pleasing to both her and Ed. Pete gallantly claimed Kate Frazer for the grand march. She gave Pete her consent. Ed escorted Mrs. Brennan.

At first a hum of admiration, pleasing to Kate, proved that her power to charm was felt. It followed her, enraptured her—at first; but soon it shifted elsewhere! Kate, too wary, did not show her irritation. Politeness compelled her to respond in kind to cold nods from Prime, Vangie, and Easton—politeness to their hosts. Each such nod was a knife stab for Ed Frazer. He knew his old-time friends were commenting in low tones upon what had occurred. He wished then that he had Prime and Easton back with him.

Kate kept an ear out to find who had stolen her diadem of public favor. As the "Bird of Blue" waltz pulsed, and happy couples swung, she heard a cowboy say to his partner in passing:

"That handsome woman? She's that woman that was so kind to Bar Six boys in Omaha that time."

"She's from the East," the girl replied, "but she's just like folks."

Kate knew they meant Prime's visitor. She had not had a good look at Teresa, with Jim in the buckboard. And then Teresa had been dusted with alkali, and her hat had been awry. But now——

Teresa floated by, waltzing superbly, on Harry Brennan's arm. Harry was the region's best waltzer. Their dancing was the poetry of motion exemplified.

Teresa's pretty dress, her grace, poise, the great cactus flower in her hair, her small feet shod in snowy pumps, with a diamond buckle on each, that winked and blinked, as her feet peeped in turn from under her skirt, all made up a picture of feminine loveliness seldom beheld. The girl in Teresa, so long repressed because of responsibility and business cares, came out, and she drew the hearts of men to her.

The story of how she had helped Jim out of trouble and entertained the Bar Six crowd in her own home, had been whispered everywhere. The punchers worshiped her as if she had been a visitor from another planet. Vangie, Prime, all Bar Six, and C Diamond Tail kept sounding Teresa's praises. At the end of the second dance, she was the center of interest.

Kate might have been entirely neglected, but her card was promptly filled out by Harry Brennan's riders, down to the youngest boy roper. She was kept so busy she did not notice the plot at first. Seeing her fully occupied, Vangie, with Prime discreetly absent, managed to bring Ed Frazer and Teresa Bolton together, as if by accident. Then Vangie was wisely silent, while Teresa, coached in advance, apologized to Ed Frazer.

"I don't know what came over me when you called the other day, Mr. Frazer; it must have been the excitement of fighting that horrid snake. I spoke quickly, yet I was moved by sincere love for your sweet daughter."

Frazer braced back, hands laced behind him. In his fine boots, delicately corded trousers, frilled white silk shirt, neat bow tie, his face ruddy, his heavy shock of silvered hair in perfect order, he was a handsome man. Teresa had to acknowledge it in her heart.

Past them the crowd drifted in the moonlight. Prime whirled by, with Silent Tripp. She was nice to all the Bar Six outfit that night. They, recalling former days, when they had escorted her afar to parties, holding her in deep honor and reverence, made it plain that, though she was absent from Bar Six, she was their pal. Prime let them fill her card, reserving only a few places for Harry Brennan, Jim, and other old-time friends. Ed heard Prime's happy laugh, Silent's words of praise.

"I honor yore sentiments, but what is between me an' my daughter is a family matter," Frazer replied to Teresa, with grave courtesy. Somehow he felt that he was weakening his defenses, for she went serenely on:

"I know Prime doesn't feel bitterly toward you!"

"If only I could feel that!" Frazer's stiffness was melting fast.

"She always speaks of you with deepest respect," said Teresa eagerly.

Silent's droning phrases came to them on the notes of Prime's clear laugh. Teresa Bolton seized the favorable moment.

"Prime, a gentleman to see you."

Frazer would have escaped, but the music ceased just then. Prime came, Silent standing apart, smiling approvingly. Teresa, determined to be the peacemaker, got hold of one of Ed's hot hands, held it out, and put Prime's into it.

Prime's voice trembled. "Dad, dad, you're not hostile to me? I've got my Frazer pride, and I won't be put upon, but I love you."

"There, Little Augur." The endearing term slipping out. "We've got our loads to carry, but we can be friends still."

"Yes, dad, friends. But I've got to work out my own salvation on Circle Dot X."

"I'll help some, if yo'll let me. You've got a partner?"

"Miss Bolton, here. She's so good!"

Frazer gave Teresa his warm, slow smile. "Then I owe you something besides what you did for Bar Six hands in Omaha that time? Ma'am," taking Teresa's hand in his left—the right still holding Prime's—and kissing the back of it fervently, "if there's anything I can do, let me know. We Frazers don't overlook kindness to us or ours."

"Oh, please excuse me, I didn't know, Ed——"

Kate certainly did know now, but she had shaken off Harry's outfit of time killers in order to interrupt. Kate would have withdrawn, she made it appear, but somehow she managed to get Frazer to take her arm. The chill, which she knew how to create, fell between Prime and her father, and she got him soon in the midst of a circle of older cowmen, wallflowering it. As for Kate, knowing she was outshone by Teresa, she sat out the remainder of the dances.

There had been some talk that the Frazers would remain with the Brennans for a few days, but Kate told Ed at dawn she would not stay. Ed gathered his outfit, and, as they rode off, Kate heard "Long Tom," a Texan, drawling still about Teresa: "She's some shy on Weste'n ways, but she's a heap o' savvy, an' she'll learn faster'n a steer, endin' a dry drive, c'n get to th' first water he smells. Why, she's been in public on'y once, an' she belongs, right now."

A wave of hatred for Teresa swept Kate's inner being then.

CHAPTER XX

AND WHAT CAME OF IT

KATE was too shrewd to hector Ed for talking to Prime and Teresa, but Frazer felt the hostility of Kate for Prime's partner. Ed was very tired of the whole feminine squabble, as he termed it. He thought it would ease down in time, and all would be well.

Having smoked his last black cigar the night before, he had been trying to get comfort from some mild ones Pete Brennan had given him, as he had ridden for home. As they rode, Ed's brain, cleared of the secret drug, functioned more normally; he was alert, if nervous.

As the cavalcade passed a dog town, several prairie dogs emerged from their burrows. Close together were two owls, blinking solemnly at the coming sun. Ed suddenly whipped out his guns, shot right and left. The owls dissolved into puffs of gray-brown feathers, as the big bullets spattered their bodies against the dog mounds on which they had been perched. As the horses, some a bit gun shy, ceased prancing, Ed holstered his guns and called:

"Hadn't shot a gun for weeks. I can't get rusty."

This light-swift exhibition of lethal skill opened Kate's eyes. She had heard of Frazer's terrific speed on the draw, but had discounted some of the tales told of Ed. She had seen Brazos shoot, could shoot well herself; but Ed's certainty and rapidity were revelations. She would have ridden to him and given him praise, but he called:

"Kate, I'm goin' to roll my horse for Bar Six. I want a real ride."

He lifted Tom Tucker. None of them could catch him. His mood was disturbing to Kate, who fell back with the men. At once a constraint fell upon them. She feared that they had been discussing her in her absence. She felt irritated and cut Thunder sharply. He bolted. She hoped they might follow, but they let her go ahead alone. She felt a dumb rage against them all.

"They wouldn't have let Prime get a foot out of their sight, escorting her home from a dance like this. I can ride alone, and not a man bothers his mind!" These were her thoughts.

Ed Frazer came sweeping up the little home slope, throwing Tucker to a slithering stop, all four feet sliding. He swung down, tossed the reins to a ready lad from the stables. Ed was twitchily alert. From the tail of his eye he saw a man whisk about the corner of the bunk house. Then Brazos came, smiling a greeting.

"Howdy! Glad yo're back. Others 'bout due?"

"No; they'll be a while coming. Ever'thing O. K.?"

"Quiet as a tired trail herd on bed ground, sir."

"Who was that at th' bunk house?"

"Oh, a chuck-liner! Just fed him, and he's lopin' by now."

The stranger passed on the trail below. He saluted with surly indifference. Ed kept eying him.

"If it wasn't for that black beard, I'd say he was some kin to Hart Trantor, Braz."

"Oh, Trant—he pulled his freight plumb out, long ago."

Ed went indoors, craving one of those big black cigars. He got one, bit the end savagely, and

lighted up. At the first inhalation the solace of it penetrated to every fiber of him. He relaxed; irritation fled. He lay down and fell asleep, with hardly a sigh.

Some time later Kate came in and found Ed still asleep. Brazos tiptoed in beside her. They watched Ed in silence. Brazos whispered:

"He always comes back to those doped ones, eh, Kate."

She drew him into her own room and told him what had happened at the Brennan dance. She felt the need for Brazos now. She had planned, planned, yet the game seemed to have slipped just beyond her reach. The sudden meeting of Prime and Ed had made Kate uneasy. They talked long.

When Brazos tiptoed past the sleeping ranch king nothing certain had been decided upon. But Kate had shown Brazos the will, made out in her favor, and he had told her that, rather than see Bar Six slip from them, he would do what she thought best. They parted with the understanding that they were to meet late that night for final planning.

Frazer awakened toward evening, heavy-eyed, silent. Kate tried in vain to charm him from that mood. They were sitting on the porch in the moonlight. He listened, but did not respond to her attempts to arouse him. After a time he left her abruptly. Stealing inside she found him in his room, sitting before a stand, on which he had propped up two pictures; one of Prime and the other of the dead woman whose place Kate held. A panic of fear was her portion, as she crept guiltily away. What if he were to turn upon her? She remembered those two shots. How could any one face such a man if he——

"Kate," he called, in a tone of authority, new to her, "go get me that will!"

For a moment she imagined that command had been born of her fears; then he repeated it. She was impelled to go to him. His eyes fixed her with a gaze, cold, alien; his will was dominating her own!

"Yes, Ed," she whispered, as she got the paper from its hiding place in a cubby in the wall.

He opened it up, saying sharply: "Leave me now. I want to study this." He held the will as if about to tear it; then seemingly he thought better of it.

The woman went to him and laid one cheek against his head, put her arms about his neck, and asked, with all the subtle appeal of which she was capable: "Ed, ain't you satisfied with me? What's wrong?"

"Kate," he replied, not cuddling his head to her cheek, as of yore, "I oughtn't to've cut my Prime off."

"His Prime!" Aloud she said: "I told you so, didn't I?"

"Yes." The memory of her subtle words on that former occasion worked in her favor now. Then he gave the will to her. "I'll think it over. Put it away. I can have a codicil tacked on."

"Do it next time you're at Willow Springs. I'll remind you."

"That's a good girl, Kate!" A cold kiss on her cold cheek was her reward.

"And, Ed, we may get Prime back. She's had her fling."

"Yes," he replied eagerly, completely deceived; "we may do it. I'm goin' to bed. I'm heavy-haided. Comin'?"

"In a while. I want to write a letter first."

He tilted the bottle several times, lighted up an-

other black cigar, and at last went to bed for good.

Now the ranch was quiet, Kate knew. The moon swung up; in the corrals a horse shook himself; another snorted. With soft tread Brazos came to scratch at the outer door. Kate went out to him. He drew her up to the rock seat. She shivered at his first question.

"Did Frazer do some fancy shooting comin' home?"

"Yes, Braz. Ever seen him shoot—to mean it?"

"No, but I've heard. In early days, when there were no Strangers, Ed always led the posses to get bad men. Many tried to get him. All died."

He was silent then; she wordless. Each shrank from bringing up the darkling thought at the bottom of the other's evil mind. It was the woman whose blacker courage mounted to the peak of decision first.

"I've got a plan, Braz. We've got to move fast. He almost took the will back to-night; has a notion of bringin' Prime home."

Still he was silent, nursing one big knee. Then he said: "It looks bad, entire. What's yore plan?"

"Way yo're fixed, you can't do it."

"No; got to be done from behind. No man c'n get him from the front."

"Then who'll it be?"

"Trantor!"

"Will he?"

"He'd kill his mother for a thousand. Now that's settled. Who'll be blamed for it?"

"I want to be rid of Carl Trescott, too, so I c'n marry Vangie as I want to."

"That li'l white liver? I owe him one for quitting me and Trant that time. Well, when he ran,

he left his best silk neckcloth. I got it in my war bag."

Their heads came close together; their whispers died almost on their lips. Some of Kate's talk showed Brazos that the woman was beginning to dislike Vangie for siding with Prime. Kate summed up finally:

"Here's the nub of my plan. We do it so Carl is blamed. Let him be suspected of trying to kidnap Vangie at the same time. That will take the trail plumb away from us. Carl's horse has got a little split in his hoof, you say?"

"Yes, that will work out. Kate, I'm goin' in deep for you, and I want proof that you love me. I been pushed aside long 'nuff."

She let him take her in his strong arms for a second, and she returned his kiss. Then she went in to the man whom she had cozened into trusting her with the chief place of honor within his power. Brazos, creeping quietly down to the bunk houses, felt for the first time that he had the handsome, scheming woman fully committed to him.

Kate, looking down upon Ed Frazer's face, was thinking of how he had scattered the owls to feathery puffs with his guns.

CHAPTER XXI

SPINNING WEBS

EARLY next day, Ed, yearning again for black cigars, found himself wondering over Kate's behavior when he had asked for the will. But Kate had fallen in so cleverly with his idea of a codicil favoring Prime that Ed was disarmed of suspicion. Reading his thoughts, Kate drew her chair up to his and gave him something else to worry about.

"Ed, I'm alarmed over Vangie."

"Well?" he asked brusquely. "She seemed as healthy at the dance as a range cow."

"Not her bodily health. But I've got to plan for her."

"Plan?" He sensed this was more "woman's business," promising more friction. "I'm gun-shy of woman-made plans."

"Yes, plans. Vangie ought to settle down. She's shiftless an' ramblin' in her ways. She thinks a heap of you, if she is away. Help me out, Ed?"

"If I can," he said, making a rueful face and rubbing his abundant hair.

"I don't want much to start. Just fog Carl away from Vangie."

"Carl's a good boy, Kate."

"But we don't want a cow hand for our son-in-law!"

"A Bar Six hand is usually a pretty good man, Kate," he replied obstinately.

"Ed, you wouldn't marry our daughter to a hand?"

"How does that fit it?" he asked, starting up amazedly.

"Vangie's my daughter—an' yourn too, now—same's Prime is."

"Kate, if Prime wants to marry a real he-man puncher, let her. She'll do as she pleases, anyway."

"Perhaps! But, Ed, help me with Vangie—a little?"

"Yes," he replied, relieved to find the talk did not veer to the will. "I'll jump him first chance."

Scouting for scattered bunches of cattle in broken lands south of the big house, Trescott rode along. With a light heart he was building air castles upon Vangie's love phrases, uttered at the Brennan dance. An elopement might loom ahead, in order for them to get married without Kate's consent. But when did a cowboy lover blench at eloping with the pretty girl of his choice? Carl was happy, reckless, hopeful—just a man in love with all the world.

Oddly enough two others circled for strays in that broken land that day, Brazos and Bob Grant. They had been ordered to ride farther east. Brazos had received the order, but in transmitting it to Bob, had made it rather indefinite. So, when they had drifted over where Carl was, Bob did not take it much amiss, being a jolly, thoughtless youngster himself. Coming out upon a little shoulder of land, they saw Ed Frazer and Kate riding toward Carl.

Approaching Carl, Ed was averse to doing what was expected by Kate. He spoke fretfully once to her, hoping for a real row.

"I'll jus' chase Trescott out—entire."

"No," she replied, with her habitual oblique method of attack, "he's a good boy. Just reason with him about Vangie."

"I'll make a fool o' myself once more," Ed said.

Carl saw them then and came, whooping, batting

his horse, Sour Face, with his hat, rising high in his stirrups and yelling, to show the boss he was alive. Frazer frowned, as Carl reined in happily. Kate kept off to one side, so they would clash the more.

Ed, with the blundering energy of a man who knows he is wrong, wasted no time. "Trescott, I got a bone to pick with you."

"Why, Mr. Frazer, I hope my work's done well."

"This is something else."

"When a man's work's done, that ends it." Carl was standing on the immutable law of range life.

"It ought, Trescott. But ain't you aiming a trifle high with yore sweetheartin'?"

Carl started in his saddle, so that his horse jumped. The boy gentled Sour Face, his youthful eyes searching Ed's face for signs of possible humor. Frazer had upon occasion played queer jokes upon his men, but Carl saw at once that this was no joke. His lips curled, and he stiffened.

"You mean keep away from Vangie?" he asked with cowboy directness.

"Yes, entire."

"I thought there seemed no objection. I'm havin' my money now. Ask Jarve how my account stands on Bar Six books."

"That ain't it," said Frazer, and he had to look away, so small did he feel before this honest-eyed boy. "Vangie's my daughter now, or the same as that. Mrs. Frazer an' I might have other views. Understand?" He bent over to press his point home.

Carl did not flinch. His voice, hard as steel, gave back menace for menace. "No; not unless Vangie makes me. Now, I can pull my freight?"

Frazer, feeling very foolish, blundered on: "As a cow hand, I like you, Carl, but——"

Here Kate edged Thunder beside Frazer's Tucker,

cutting in: "Carl, don't do anything wild. Vangie don't know her mind. Just now she's moonin' off after Prime an' that Jim Easton," she said with sly emphasis.

"You let Vangie alone, that's whatever," said Frazer, shaking his big fist at Carl, who, like the gamecock that he was, squared his slim shoulders.

Raising his voice almost to a scream he emitted his defiance: "No; not unless she says so. I'll quit Bar Six in a holy minute!"

"Let him alone, Ed; he's a good boy. I'll speak to Vangie," Kate said in an apparent effort to soothe them.

By now she felt that to the eyes of the watchers, whom she had spied out on the shoulder above, it would appear that a quarrel had taken place. She did not want either Carl or Frazer to see Brazos and Bob Grant then.

Frazer, humbled inside, irritated, secretly ashamed, was not sorry to let her coax him away. "Woman's business! Let her have anything to keep the peace," was his mental summing up, as he rode off with her.

Carl sat for a time, fidgeting with bridle reins, the strings on the skirts of his saddle—anything to take up attention, while his brain, beelike, buzzed over the episode just closed. He started from his puzzlement to find Frazer and Kate far away—Brazos and Bob Grant sliding down the bank on their sure-footed nags.

That evening Pappy Yeagers rode away from Bar Six, giving out that he was going away to "visit home folks East." His war bags were packed full. He went, wagging his jaw, digging at his thin beard.

CHAPTER XXII

WHERE IS VANGIE?

CARL might have ridden for a stolen call on Vangie that night, but after supper, Jarvis Larabee told him he was to ride to Tin Cow next day.

"José Almonté is ridin' to Willow Springs. Missus wants th' mail."

"All right," replied Carl carelessly, busy thinking how to meet the chaff of Brazos and Bob over his quarrel with Frazer. Later he was glad of the coming trip, for it would give him a chance to dodge out to see Vangie on the way to Tin Cow. He did think of writing to Vangie, intending to send the note by one of the Mexican lads. But this ride for the mail would make it unnecessary!

Yet Vangie did receive a note that night from a Mexican lad, who was unknown to her. He left it at the door and rode away, after saying:

"From the Señor Carlos, señora." The note read:

Vangie: Come to the Tin Cow fork about eight in the morning. Frazer's making a row. I won't stand for it.

She showed the note to Prime and Teresa Bolton. They agreed she ought to go, as requested. Vangie by now had fully surrendered her heart to Carl, for his soft tongue had learned to turn the prettiest compliments, and underneath his former soft ways a new-forged iron of manhood had suddenly appeared.

Strangely enough Frazer wondered that night if the south springs had been broken in upon by stock. He got a sudden notion to ride south early next day to see. Kate, perhaps, had put the idea into

his mind, yet with what deft phrase he could not have told. Kate pleaded press of work indoors. So Ed said he would ride south alone. He frightened her at the last by asking:

"Where do you keep my will? Same place?"

"Yes."

Then she was called away by a servant to see to something. He was gone when she returned—without a word of farewell.

Carl rode early, too, mail bag across his shoulder, humming:

"Ah load mah gun wid a sugar plum,
An' Ah shoot them greaser gals, one by one!
Roll yo' tail an' roll it high—
Yo'll be an angleworm, by and by!"

"If any one steals that hoss," Brazos called after him, so loudly several heard, "we can follow his track till th' warm place freezes, and then we can trail you on th' ice. That crack in his left hind foot shows plain."

Sour Face did not limp, yet he had a cracked hoof. Carl called back a retort at Brazos, sang again, and was gone from their sight.

Where the Tin Cow trail forked toward Circle Dot X, Carl began to think how pleasant it would be to meet Vangie and watch her draw her red under lip into that enticing crease that made a fellow want to kiss it. For a long way now the trail to Tin Cow was through light, dry sand. There the tracks of Sour Face were plain and firm, for he was the first animal over the trail that morning. The night wind had swept the trail there clean, working loose sand into all older tracks.

After the sandy patch came hard going. There Sour Face picked his way, while Carl daydreamed.

Over a high ridge south of the trail a man rose into view, mounted on a rangy horse, a long-stepping horse, like old Sour Face. As he came he kept to a line where cattle had crossed the trail, going toward the south. Coming to the hard Tin Cow trail the man swung down, took up his horse's left hind foot, and stroked something across it several times. He noted then each mark that Sour Face had made getting from the sandy land to the hard going. His horse stood, while he stepped from stone to stone, fanning out the faint marks of Sour Face, right up to the edge of the sand. Then he went back, mounted his horse, worked him squarely about, and sent him over Sour Face's trail across the sand toward the trail fork leading to Circle Dot X.

Now, strange to say, the split-hoof mark, that showed in Sour Face's track, was duplicated in the sign of this other rangy, long-stepping horse. The rider had his hat well down and wore a great, sweeping black beard. From the duplicated tracks one might easily have formed the honest opinion that Sour Face had been ridden up the Tin Cow trail, then turned back to the forks! Once in a while the black-bearded man edged his horse off the trail, as if the rider had made a clumsy attempt to hide that return trail, like a clumsy, rattle-headed boy, such as Carl, might be expected to hide it.

Where the trail forked for Circle Dot X, Mr. "Black Beard" edged his horse behind a group of organ cactus. After a moment he laid his hand soothingly on the neck of that rangy horse, that had left that return track of the split hoof, so much like Sour Face's own. The rangy horse was displaying signs of an inclination to nicker; but he must have been well trained, for he did not utter a sound.

A man came riding along the trail from Bar Six,

riding easefully, swiftly. The big stallion's gait was mile-devouring, and he caught the scent of that other horse in passing the organs and raised his head to neigh. The rider, from long habit, knowing that meant some one else was on the trail, let his right hand glide toward his left side.

Oh, gallant, kind-hearted gentleman, with no fault save this, that you dreaded new faces, new ways in your home!

Black Beard's gun leaped—flamed—and Tom Tucker, riderless, galloped free, snorting with terror. Black Beard's rangy horse never quivered, showing how he had been trained to remain quiet under fire. The scoundrel touched the rangy horse with a light spur and held him firmly under control, as he minced toward the stricken man, who was inert and still. Black Beard half raised his gun to shoot again, but saw, with the pride of one who takes satisfaction in good workmanship, that the ball had struck his victim in the left breast. From that spot, as the big man lay prone, the red, pulsing life fluid showed on the white, frilled shirt. His assailant got down, listened at the wounded breast a moment, nodded his head, and then remounted, dropping a silk neckerchief, as his horse reared.

Black Beard whirled his horse about and rode hard, yet often he kept to places where the full imprint of that telltale hoof showed. After a time he came to where many cattle had passed, and he rode in among their sign and swung down. He took the telltale hoof of the rangy horse in his hand and, from his pocket, drew a tin box, from which he took a dab of tarry stuff, smearing that into the split; then he smoothed the hoof out with his deft thumb's ball, so that it would leave no telltale sign behind for a long distance—perhaps not for days.

"I hated to cut that slit in yore hoof, Boggy,"

Black Beard said to his intelligent mount, "but I had to do it. That hack-saw blade in my knife sure came in handy that time."

The horse nipped at his master in play, for even the greatest of villains may be heroes to their horses, if kind to them. A well-trained, well-used horse, Boggy evidently was—one who repaid care and friendship.

So Boggy presently trod from the cattle sign to leave the trail of four good hoofs, and Mr. Black Beard, examining them by turning half about in his saddle, laughed a little at the cleverness of his device.

He followed the cattle signs, for they seemed to go where he wanted to go. He passed grazing bunches, here and there, and after a time he came into a larger bunch. There he went aside and, behind a clump of thick scrub growth, came upon a horse tied to a tree, and it was a pinto horse. The angry and unafraid girl, who was lashed with her back to a tree, he let up, cutting the cords that bound her ankles. He let her get back the circulation in the feet and ankles and then, without undoing the gag, set her upon the pinto horse, binding her feet under the pinto's belly.

Then he took the pinto's bridle reins and started away at a fair pace, after letting the girl's hands loose, so she could balance herself by holding onto the horn of the saddle. He did not take off the gag. He warned her not to, using intelligible signs, for he had not spoken to her once. He did not need to; he merely tapped the butt of his gun significantly.

The girl, who had been studying the man intently, suddenly made choking sounds behind the gag. Mr. Black Beard turned about and warned her

again, in a heavy, guttural voice—perchance disguised.

"None o' that! I'm takin' you to Carl Trescott. He'll pay me."

The girl shook her head in vigorous dissent.

Mr. Black Beard clucked to the rangy horse, making now four smooth tracks, and they went on and on, toward the south.

Whenever possible they traveled with the sign of the cattle. The man often glanced at the sky, as if pondering upon the chances of rain washing out the sign. There were some clouds off to the east, that might yield rain, but it was a dry and thirsty time, and all signs fail in time of drought.

About midday, Tom Tucker, who had bucked his saddle well off, lacking a rider to tighten cinches between bucking spells, was seen running loose by Silent and Pecos, as they circled, cruising for hiding strays. The stallion was to the west of the place where his master had been shot, and he resisted capture for some time. Eventually Pecos managed to flip a rope onto him, while Silent pretended to run away, and thus he drew him on in what Tom took for play. At once they began the search, having regard only for one thing, to find Ed Frazer as soon as possible. Details could be attended to later, if anything was wrong with him. Their experience told them that the chances of finding Frazer were good.

Immediately the old-time cattle men started running Tucker's sign backward, one of them leading him the while. They discussed the desirability of returning to the ranch to inquire if Tucker had not run away from up there without his saddle. But Pecos pointed to the saddle mark on the sweaty sides, and then both of them compressed their lips and knew it was a case of a man hurt—perhaps

dragged to his death. The first thing was to find Frazer, they agreed. Getting no answer to signal shots, they plugged along Tucker's rambling back trail.

About noon Prime heard a hail outside Circle Dot X house and went out, with Miss Bolton. Kate Frazer was there, on Thunder, and she gave them a cold smile.

"I'd like to speak to my daughter a moment, if you don't mind," she remarked with aggravating politeness.

Miss Bolton returned her stare with good interest. Prime said:

"I don't see why you can't if you can find her."

"Isn't she here? She has been."

"Yes, she has been, but she rode off early to-day."

"Do you know where to? I wish to ask her to come back to Bar Six, at least for a visit. I am a mother, and I am lonesome for her." There was a little catch in her low voice.

"Vangie told us she was going to ride to the fork of the trail and meet Carl Trescott. He sent her a note."

"Oh, he did?" asked Kate, her eyebrows very much up. "Thank you!"

Then the quirt fell, and Thunder was gone.

Kate Frazer came to the fork of the trail, just as Silent and Pecos arrived near where Frazer had fallen. They saw the body and called to her wildly. When she got there and flung herself from the saddle and on to the inert form, all the horses were snorting. The men started to look for signs, Pecos still mounted, Silent afoot.

"Who could have done it?" Kate asked, starting up, a hand to either temple. "Oh, my man! Have either of you seen Vangie? She rode this way to meet Carl Trescott."

Pecos began to study the trail closely.

"Carl came down from Bar Six—why, he never went to Tin Cow; he rode straight south, yes, he did! There's his hoss' track, goin' out the Tin Cow trail, then comin' back this way and——"

"He rode behind those organs an' shot Ed, as Ed came on," said Silent, for his eyes had been busy, as he had kept stepping carefully about. "Trescott did it. Look, there's his neckcloth, that he said he'd lost—dropped it when his hoss reared, after he looked to see if he'd killed Ed."

He got the bit of evidence. Pecos demanded of Kate:

"Why should Carl shoot Ed?"

"Oh, I don't know! Let's not worry about that now. We've got to get Ed's body home. They had a quarrel yesterday."

"Carl an' Ed——"

"Yes, over Vangie. He forbid Carl to court her. I told him to tell Carl—I ain't got time to explain now."

"We'll get th' body home," Pecos said. "Then we'll run th' sign out, if it don't rain before. It feels to me like a break in the drought."

"Yes, let's get Ed's body home. You two stay here and watch. I'll ride to Bar Six for a wagon or litter."

"Hadn't I better ride?" Pecos asked.

"Yes, that would be better. I can stay. Leave Silent here."

Pecos hit the trail at a furious clip, casting up a great cloud of dirt and sand.

"I wish I knew where Vangie is," Kate said, with Ed's head on her lap. "Trescott may have forced her to go with him."

"I'll run his sign out goin' south, if you say, ma'am," Silent offered.

"Please don't leave me alone with it, Silent." She indicated the still form. "I couldn't bear to be alone. I'm glad Pecos thought to have you stay."

"All right, th' sign'll keep, I hope," Silent replied, yet he cast an uneasy eye toward the east. He secured the horses and stood waiting. The clouds drifted. The little wind came and died fitfully. Flies buzzed, and Kate brushed them from the high, cold forehead of the man whose head was in her lap.

Every little while she kept saying, as if to herself: "Where is Vangie?"

"She's got a heap to bear—husband shot down, her girl gone!" Silent spoke to himself, thinking pityingly of Kate.

CHAPTER XXIII

THE FOUR-PIECE WILL

WATCHING Kate hold the head of Frazer in her lap, Silent for once was true to name. His heart ached for her. He had to glance aside at the near-by sign to cover his agitation. Then he recovered speech.

"Missus Kate, Ed wasn't shot when this sign was made!"

She was eying him keenly. Silent noted some traces of grief had gone from her handsome face. He continued eagerly:

"If Ed had died simultaneous with th' shot, he'd be stiff now. Look how his neck rolls in your lap as you move!"

Her nerve almost broke at that. Silent, bending over, began a more thorough examination. The crimson stain over the heart, the inert man's extreme pallor, had deceived them in their first flurry. Then, too, that a man should be shot once—examined—as the sign showed—by the shooter, pointed to one thing: The assailant thought he had killed.

Silent's ear came away from Ed's chest. "His heart's flutte'ing. Don't get up or stir; hold his haid just so in yore lap. In such cases a single extra cramp in a wounded man's neck may finish him. Don't stir! I'll get help—here, sop water out o' my canteen on to his haid."

Kate now knew she must do as she was told. Silent peeled the shirt off of Frazer's big chest. The wound showed an inch to one side of the heart, ranging to the right. Silent produced a memorandum book from a pocket of Ed's flannel shirt. He

had used the book to jot down notes about work he wanted done. It was a short, thick book, inclosed in a rubberoid cover, with a pencil shoved into the ribbed back. The forty-five-caliber ball had scored the sturdy book across. Evidently Frazer had been partly wheeled about at the shot, thus presenting his breast at a slight angle, instead of the dead-on target planned for!

Kate took the book absently. It meant nothing then. The stained pages, cut by the bullet, fluttered. The force of the impact had made the book's binding limp, almost useless. Something fell from the book—something folded. Silently she picked it up and laid it on to the shredded book in her right hand. Kate glanced at it.

"Silent," said Kate, strangely quietly, "ride that Tin Cow trail a ways—not too far. Look at the sign before it gets drifted by the wind."

"Yes'm," replied Silent, glad to be of use. "Want more water?"

"No; go look at that trail for the sign. It may show something."

"All right, but while I'm gone, don't let his head roll none. One crick in his neck, with his heart that weak, might end it, certain, complete."

"Yes, yes, yes!" Kate could scarcely restrain her anxiety to be alone, lest he suspect why. "I'll take good care o' him."

"I sure admire yore nerve, entire," said Silent, as he began to walk up the trail toward Tin Cow, that he might the better examine it. The track of the split-hoof horse going and coming he saw, and he saw, too, how the one returning had gone aside at times in a seemingly clumsy effort to cover the trail. Silent wondered at Trescott's folly.

"But he might have been drunk, got tanked up after making up his mind to pull his freight. He

smelled some of hooch when he came back from living with Trant an' Brazos."

Kate Frazer watched Silent stride away stiff-leggedly in his mesquite-resisting chaps. Then she smiled down upon Frazer's pallid face—such a meaning smile as Jael might have smiled, as she set the nail to the temple of Sisera. One hand was under the stricken man's head, and she began to lift it, a little at a time. In the other hand she still held that little memorandum book, with the bullet-scored pages fluttering in a puff of wind, that came just then.

A splotch of shade fell upon her, and she started, for it seemed like the sun withdrawing his shining as a warning. She noted, in a swift glance aloft, that the clouds were gathering, and she thought of the sign that rain would wash out, if it came in time. The head of the wounded man came up, up, up, until the corded neck was bent forward, and then she was impelled somehow to look at the book. Now her eyes were fascinated by those folded sheets which Silent had laid atop the open book. They had a familiar appearance, for they were little, raggedly torn squares of a stiff linen bond paper, such as lawyers use for matters of permanent record.

Frazer's head "plopped" into her lap. She let the book drop, retaining the sheets. She spread them out over Frazer's face and pieced them together.

It was the will, torn into four pieces, slipped into the book after he had torn it. Frazer had found the cubby where she kept it, had taken it, evidently with the idea of studying it over, and deciding upon some changes. She glanced toward the Tin Cow trail to note if Silent was returning. He was not. She read, on one corner of the torn will, this notation, in Frazer's heavy hand:

"Memo: To have lawyer draw new will, giving

Prime half." It was dated that day, for he had a habit of dating his notes in the book, and this habit had impelled him to put the date on the will.

The wounded man, it seemed, sighed, yet she was not sure. Rage shook her, but she had to remain as she was.

"To have had the prize within reach! To have the bullet turned by the book concealing this will!" Her thoughts were leaping in silent fury. "And now it is all lost—he may recover and make a new will, cutting me down."

But she controlled her white-hot inner rage and let her reason range over the situation. An expedient presented itself. The writing could be erased; the will pieced together. Some story could be told about how it became torn. It was still his will. The pencil marks would yield to the touch of an eraser, if she were careful.

She tugged the pencil from its holder and deliberately laid the bit of torn will on Frazer's broad forehead, using his body as a support for her added crime. She applied the eraser lightly. The marks still remained. She bethought herself of an ancient device and touched the tip of the eraser to the tip of her tongue, to moisten it and make it bite the paper more sharply, for she had scant time to fix the thing before Silent returned, and she did not want him to see her at it.

At first the moistened rubber did work better; then a blue, watery stain appeared on the paper, and she felt a touch of fear, the first she had felt in this black business. For the pencil, as she now saw by a hasty glance at the printing on the side of it, was an indelible one, and the moisture on the eraser had but turned the pencil marks to an indelible ink that would not yield to erasers or anything that would leave the paper whole. Some of

the words of the writing ran over the typed phrases of the form, on which the will was made out: "being of sound mind and disposing spirit."

In her masculine firmness and disregard of all softer feeling, she had plunged into this new error. She had set on to the torn will the indelible seal of Frazer's intention to change it. She did not know but that in law, the note being dated, it might operate as a valid codicil and give Prime half of his estate—half of Bar Six.

"And I came near killing him by holding up his head too far," she thought, yet without pity for the man whose death a moment back had seemed so desirable.

She crumpled the torn will into her bosom and hid it, letting the book lie on the ground. When Silent came to her, she was holding Frazer's head steady, sitting very upright.

"I'm tired, Silent, sitting this way so long, but I think he's stronger. I thought I heard him sigh once."

"That's good, fine!" Silent said, bending over, himself. "Yes, his heart is going stronger. Probably it's been weak or strong by turns, all th' time since he was shot. That whack he got close to th' heart knocked him out. I've seen men live that was shot through th' chest. In this air a little ventilation don't seem t' hurt a he-man's lungs none."

"But why is he so limp, and why doesn't he move his legs?"

"Th' doc'll answer that. I'm no specialist, ma'am. Say, that Trescott, he must been drunk. Went up Tin Cow trail to that place where th' goin's hard. He turned there, came right back here, an' shot Ed. I'd like to throw down on that hombre. Ed took him back from Brazos an' Trantor after he'd quit."

"Are they coming from above?" she asked. "I think I hear them."

"Yes, I do now."

Her handsome face was suffused with passionate eagerness, as the boys came with the litter. She took a corner herself, as they walked carefully along, and she walked softly and implored them not to stumble. No wife, who loved her husband with her heart's best affection, could have been more tender of a wounded mate than was Kate Frazer on that trip. Her mind and her body were turned by her dominant will to the one purpose—to keep the feeble spark of life in the bullet-torn body until she could use that spark for her own ends. Once she spoke to Jarvis Larrabee, who was carrying the opposite corner of the load from her.

"Any one ride for the Strangers?"

"Brazos. He offered the first. His Comet is speedy, so I told him to go. José was over to Willow Springs, on that arrant fo' you, or I'd sent him. Brazos offered to go pronto, so I sent him."

"Start a man for a doctor. Let him ride to Willow Springs."

"Yes, ma'am." Jarvis gave the order, and Rancocus Al disappeared in a cloud of dust that pursued him, but did not seem to come up even with him.

Then they resumed their steady trudging, made the more irksome by their high-heeled boots, that were not fitted for much walking. Now and then some of the men remarked upon Kate Frazer's grit and devotion. She heard these phrases, and they made her feel secure in her rôle of a devoted wife who might soon be a widow.

All took turns in carrying corners of that litter that at any moment might become a bier. It was Pecos who asked, after they had gone about half way:

"Was Miss Prime told? Any one think of her?"

Kate would have forbade sending for her, to whom the hearts of these rough men went out, but her craft held her lips. She nodded, as Jarvis looked to her for orders, and then Bob Grant twitched his horse, wheeled him, and went flying. As he went, Jarvis called after him:

"When yo' come to the fork o' the trail, don't over-run that sign leadin' south." Then Kate spoke to him, and he added:

"Have Prime bring Vangie over with her. She must be there now."

The signs of rain were less now, and they discussed the sureness of running out the sign and coming up with the killer. They had no doubts about running out the trail, for they would send over for Big Jim, who was a natural trailer, one who never had failed to bring in whatever he had started after. Perhaps he would come with Prime. He surely would, they believed.

Carl Trescott awakened from his daydreaming to a realization that he could beat Sour Face's dust cloud into Tin Cow, get the mail, and swirl back in time to have a nice long visit with Vangie. He yelled, began to swat Sour Face along with his hat, and made funny, endearing sounds to let the old horse know there was a man atop him. Sour Face uncurled his reserve springs of power and burst into Tin Cow with an energy that at once became part of the day's gossip. He put his letters into the mail and got the Bar Six stuff into his bag. Ordinarily Carl was good for two or three hours in town—longer if his luck at stud poker held out. But to-day he dodged all acquaintances and made ready to go back. At the wagon yard a slim, wiry, lantern-jawed man hailed him.

"They tell me yo're from Bar Six."

"That's my name an' nation," he said, pulling Sour Face up. They were alone; a dog fight had taken the usual wagon-yard crowd out into the road.

"They want a hand up there?"

"Yes."

"I'll be glad o' yore comp'ny, kid."

"I ain't got no hours to spare," Carl replied impatiently.

"But I'm all ready—just a minute! Or, say, you start, an' I'll come up with you before yo're gone far. Want to pay a bill before I go."

Carl would rather not have had company. He brightened, however, when he thought he could let the new man take the mail up from the forks, while he tempted fate and Larrabee's resentment by trifling around with Vangie the rest of the day. So, when Mr. "Lantern Jaw" caught up in a few moments, his war bags behind on the saddle, Carl was philosophically puffing.

Lantern Jaw gave his name as "Walt Gresham." Carl told him his own name and hinted that he was in a hurry. He found Gresham a steady listener and, taking this as a good sign, proposed that Gresham take the mail up from the forks when it was time.

"I'd sure admire for to do it," Gresham said heartily.

This heartiness rather puzzled Carl, who never had associated it with that cast of features, for a lantern-jawed man had once beaten him at poker, and Trescott disliked all such. Once they saw a big rattler to the side of the trail, and Lantern Jaw joked Carl into shooting thrice at it on a modest bet. Carl won, cutting the snake to bits. Carl gave him the news of the region, with suitable embellish-

ments. Lantern Jaw wagged his head owlishly. They put the miles behind them, the black horse of Lantern Jaw showing good trail qualities.

Altogether Carl had not so far found Lantern Jaw such a bad trail mate as he had feared he might be at first. As they came to the hard ground, on which Sour Face's split hoof had made no track when Carl came out, Gresham managed to idle to light a cigarette. He came up from behind to catch up and then exclaimed:

"Put them hands up!"

Carl wheeled to face a gun that wavered not. Wisely he put up his hands, but his tongue worked sharply.

"Is this a mail holdup? There's nothin' but personal letters in here."

"Aw, shut up!" Lantern Jaw replied.

He spurred his horse closer and held the gun in Carl's short ribs, as he possessed himself of Carl's weapon. He felt over the boy's slim body for any concealed arms and found none. He did not touch the mail bag. Then he gave the order:

"Easy now! Ride south an' don't make any false moves."

How long they traveled Carl could not have told, for they twisted about most unaccountably, the lantern-jawed one giving orders that Carl had to obey. Finally they came to a little glade, with thin grass in the center, and cactus, greasewood, and mesquite all about. Just beyond was a knoll.

"Get down," the man ordered, and Carl obeyed, feeling that here, perhaps, he was to be shot or set afoot, so his horse could be taken.

"I'm goin' up that knoll to look about; if you start away, I'll ride you down an' finish it pronto," Lantern Jaw informed Carl.

He took the bridle reins of Sour Face and started

off. Carl waited, dumb, helpless. He was afoot, unarmed, as against a man with two mounts and an ample arsenal of weapons. The man's black horse and Sour Face whisked around the corner of the knoll, by which Carl suspected that the best path to the top was on that far side. Carl stood very erect, and his wrath began to boil over. He hoped for a slip in Lantern Jaw's plans. He saw Lantern Jaw come out atop the knoll and look abroad diligently. The horses were evidently on the far side of the rise. The man cupped his hands and called to Carl:

"I'm goin' to watch from up here. You stay right there, or I'll ride you down, rope you, an' drag you to ribbons."

"You go to blazes in a hand basket," Carl shouted.

However, he stood still. He saw Lantern Jaw settle down, his hat showing over the top of the ridge. He seemed to be just on the other side, where he could watch the way by which they had come, without being seen himself. After a time Carl dared so far as to sit down. There was no objection. Carl watched the hat, then studied the scenery, as much as the little glade would permit. Then his gaze wandered back to the hat of the watcher on the knoll.

It was very warm there in the hollow, and Carl was not pleased with it on many accounts. He was studying how to get out of it all when his horse appeared.

"Sour Face, you dog, how do you come to be loose?"

For Sour Face was loitering into view around the base of the knoll. Carl had a hunch:

"Mebbe that geezer's asleep. Mebbe I c'n jump him an' get his gun."

He began to stalk the hat. He was very painstaking about it. He took extra pains not to make a

pebble move or a stick snap under his soles. Old Sour Face gazed at him at times, as if astounded at this creeping pose of his usually spry and nimble master. But Carl hoped Sour Face wouldn't come nickering over to him just then and by so doing awaken the sleeper.

Carl edged up the slope, found a practicable way clear to the top, and wondered why Lantern Jaw had not taken that, instead of going behind the knoll to get to its top. Carl crouched just under the crest, then sprang to the top, and went slamming and whirling into a hat!

A hat on a stick! His gun was on the ground, loaded. He took the gun, saw that it was in good order, absent-mindedly holstered it. Then he sat down abruptly and whistled. Sour Face grazed quietly below, as who should say: "That master of mine is plumb disresponsible to-day. Don't laugh!"

"I'm crazy." Carl informed himself emphatically. "I wonder what was in that one snifter I took in Tin Cow? How'd I get down here?"

He went over every detail of it, but he doubted what he had remembered. Then he saw the mail bag—the snap untampered with. He peeped inside. Not a letter opened. Then he took pains to look on the ground. The tracks of the man, where he had caught his horse, mounted, and gone away quietly, letting Sour Face loose to wander back, were plainly evident.

He heard a shot—just one—and wondered if it were part of the joke. Well, he would bite again. He got to Sour Face and rode toward the place where the shot had come from. After a time he saw some one, a woman, on a pinto horse. Was it Vangie? What was going on? Carl approached warily, then he set spurs to Sour Face and made haste.

CHAPTER XXIV

SPLIT-HOOF TRACKS

AFTER Vangie had repeated her staring at her black-bearded captor, and had made certain sounds indicating a desire to speak, Black Beard roughly stopped the pinto horse and put a blindfold onto the girl's eyes. Then he began to go forward again. Vangie had to hang on to the saddle's horn, for her feet were tied under the horse's belly. If she fell off, or were shaken off, the horse might get away and drag her to death. The captor had not yet spoken, save for that one disguised phrase that had set her to thinking and staring.

At times he stopped, then went on. The girl was ready to drop from sheer weariness when her captor stopped again, and they did not proceed for a long time. Vangie could feel that the man had gone away after dismounting, but she was helpless, for she could not see to guide her horse, and she did not doubt but that the man was close at hand. After a very long time she imagined she heard two men whispering, but set this down as folly. Then she heard the man come back again and mount his own horse.

They went forward again slowly, and presently stopped. The captor edged his horse ahead, and then Vangie heard a strange voice say:

"All right, Mr. Trescott. Here she is. No harm done. Thanks for the money."

There was a whispered reply, and Vangie caught Carl's favorite phrase: "Blazes in a hand basket." That was all, except some more remarks in a low voice addressed to "Mr. Trescott." A long silence

followed, then she heard the words: "You ride right up an' take her in a minute; she'll think yo've rescued her." Again the whisper, then *a shot!* "I'm goin' now; she'll fall for it."

Vangie heard the sounds of a departing horse, then recognized that another horse was coming toward her. She squirmed in the saddle and worked her jaws at the gag.

Carl, whirling up, tugged the blindfold off her face and cut the gag string with a neat nick of his knife. He bent over in his saddle and slashed the bonds that held her feet. He got off his horse and made ready to take her in his arms, for she was so weak that she had to cling to the saddle to hold herself from falling.

"Vangie, what is it? Who did this? I'll kill him!"

"What mischief you up to, Carl Trescott, havin' a girl kidnaped away off like thisaway?" Her under lip shot out in scorn.

"I have you kidnaped? Vangie, I don't rightly know what you mean."

"Didn't he ketch me for you, an' weren't you right here a minute ago an' made it up how you was to come an' release me—to make out you had done some great deed? Carl, yo're a triffin' fool, an' I'll not have a thing to do with you."

"Vangie, I don't know a thing about it. I was to Tin Cow with mail. See, here is th' bag!"

She displayed some interest, as Carl went on:

"I was held up comin' back by a man who said he was a new Bar Six hand. He turned me loose back here a ways. I heard a shot. I rode for it, thinkin' it was a signal from some of the bunch. I rode here and found you."

"You expect me to b'lieve all that?" Vangie asked scornfully.

Somehow it did seem to Carl futile and inadequate. She bent toward him suddenly, a finger pointing accusingly.

"That man that held you up, he left even yore gun. Why didn't you throw down on him?"

"I found th' gun. He went up a knoll an' waited. I thought he was asleep, an' I went up to jump him. All that was there was his hat, except the gun. I stuck it into my holster."

"Carl, stop lying. You can't do it convincingly enough."

"Vangie, I ain't lying."

"Who is that comin' this way?"

"It's Big Jim!"

Yes, it was Big Jim, very stern, very erect, and his gun was in his right hand, and Brilar was coming fast. Jim's face did not relax, and he did not respond to their greetings. He rode close, his jaw set, and his voice was vibrant with anger, held in strict control.

"Trescott, give me your gun. You are under arrest."

"For what?" The boy's tones were pleading.

"Oh, Jim, he's only been up to some prank. I'm not hurt, if that is what yo're after him for."

Jim jerked away Carl's gun and shoved it loosely into his own belt.

"Ride to Bar Six," he said.

"But what am I charged with?"

"Murder!"

"Murder? Who of?"

"Who of? You know!"

"No; I don't. Who, Jim?"

"Ed Frazer!"

"Jim, if you think I'd take a mean advantage of Big Augur, any way at all, put that gun to my fool

haid an' pull the trigger," Carl declared, sincerity giving his voice a decided challenge.

Jim lowered his gun, bent over, pushed the boy's hat back, and gazed long into his eyes. Carl's did not waver.

"I almost believe you, but th' sign says different. It shows where you went to Tin Cow, came back, turned down this way, shot Ed Frazer, rode south again, fell in with the trail that Vangie's pinto has traveled, and came right here. I haven't been over every foot of it, but I grubbed along in spots and rode fast in others. That split hoof on Sour Face has given you away."

"Would a range-bred man ride a split-hoof hoss when he was goin' to kill a man like Ed Frazer?" freezingly asked Carl.

"Not if he planned it ahead; but, if he was mad with passion an' came on him sudden—you had a quarrel with him yesterday."

"Yes, but how did you hear?" The boy felt he was fighting for life now.

"Bob Grant told me on the way over from Circle Dot X to the fork of the trail. They found Frazer there, as you know."

"I don't know. I'll say my say later."

"Lucky I run out this sign before the rain comes. It looked like rain a while back, but it doesn't now."

"It may rain yet," said Carl, as he realized how necessary to him it was to get one thing done before the rain came.

"It may. But I've got you, so it doesn't matter."

"Carl, tell th' truth," said Vangie, edging so close she was able to put a hand on his slim shoulder. "How did you come so early back from Tin Cow? You generally waste half a day there."

"I was expecting to see you."

"Didn't you send me a note that I was to meet you at eight o'clock at the fork of the trail?"

"No."

"I got the note at Prime's."

"Not my note."

"We'll look into that later," said Jim. "The others will be apt to be along soon. I outran them all."

"Run my sign back to where I left off th' Tin Cow trail this afternoon?" Carl asked.

"I didn't do that once for nothing," replied Jim firmly.

"I never came down that way," said Carl. He pointed to where Jim had ridden on to his tracks, leading to where he had found Vangie.

"Well, you did! What's th' use lying."

"You must have overlooked something, Jim."

"Might have," replied Jim jerkily, but his tones showed unbelief. "But I will have it all run out before yo're judged complete. But I'm sure——"

"There they come!" Vangie's sharp eyes had enabled her to discern the approach of the Bar Six men. One was in advance, waving his hat. It was Pecos, who had not been with Ed, as he rode south originally.

"Jim, ride for home. They want yo' bad," said Pecos.

"Bring him in," Jim ordered, pointing to Carl. "If he tries to lope, kill him."

CHAPTER XXV

LOVE AND CRAFT

FRAZER'S heart still beat very faintly when the litter was let down before the doorway of the big house. Kate Frazer had left it some distance behind and hastened on before to have all in readiness in Frazer's own room. She had descended upon Anuncio and the other servants and taken firm control of the situation. The furniture, heavy and costly mahogany, which Melitia had had brought in during their honeymoon by freight arks, was comfortable, and the bed was large and well ordered. Upon it the hands laid him, carrying him so tenderly that he might have been a mere babe instead of a huge, muscular man.

Once he was upon the bed, Kate thanked them with a becoming show of feeling, and they edged out, drawing great breaths of relief to be through with that part of their duty.

Then came a clatter of hoofs outside, and word was brought to her that Rancocus Al was there. She demanded that he come in at once, and her eyes queried so plainly that she had no need of words.

"How are you home so soon? What about the doctor?"

"I met José Almonté, coming back from the Springs. I gave him my fresh horse, and he went. He can outride any of us on a long run, except Easton on Brilar."

She thanked him both for his thought and speedy return to explain. José would make it sooner than any one else she could send, she knew.

Again she was alone with Frazer. When she had been alone with him at the fork of the trail, she had wished for his death. Now she wished him to live. She set her will upon it.

Taking her scissors she nipped away the shirt. With his breast wholly bare, she was able to see the wound. The bleeding had ceased, but she could not guess the course of the bullet. She wondered if the ball had come out of his back, and she felt it, without trying to turn his body over. There was a great lump along the side of his spine! He groaned faintly, as she felt of that, and she believed she had hurt him so that the pang of the hurt had reached through his coma. She was glad to hear that groan. Not that it might mean something good for the stricken man, but it seemed to promise well for her plans.

Annuncio came at her call, her thin, mean face livid with fear. She sent the woman for hot water and cloths. She cleansed the wound with steady hand, and then she had cold water brought. She wiped the fevered brow of the injured cattle king again and again. She listened, her ear close to his arching chest, and it seemed that the heart beats were stronger.

Outside the windows she knew the men were watching. She heard them talk at times in low voices, that told of their sorrow and anxiety. After a time she heard Bob Grant say:

"I found them at home. Miss Prime, she's coming right after me. Jim Easton, he left us at the forks of th' trail and rode south. He said he'd get Trescott if he went clear down into old Mexico."

Kate Frazer's own heart almost ceased to beat at that word. She heard Bob order a boy to take his horse to the corral, and then she knew from the tones of his voice that he was on a bench that ran

along the wall. She wanted to ask him a great many questions, but she had no time, for Prime would be there soon. And Easton was riding the sign—would see what the other men might overrun. Well, she had to take some chances!

Kate went to answer a knock at the door, leaving Annuncio sitting beside the bed. It was Rancocus Al, apologetic. In his hand he had two letters.

"They were answers José was bringing back. I plumb forgot 'em."

Idly she took them and was about to throw them on a table, to let them lie until a more fitting occasion. She knew José had ridden to Willow Springs, for she had herself invented the necessity for his going, in order that Carl Trescott might be sent to Tin Cow that morning, and so be in the way of her webs. José had ridden to Willow Springs four days ago. He would be not a day in making the usual two-day trip this time; he might be back by the next midnight, for he would return quickly, using fresh horses wherever they could be requisitioned along the route. No man would refuse him mounts and help. Brazos would be back in two days with Pete Brennan and the grave, settled men who would act as judges, jurors, and executioners of Trescott.

The letter from Willow Springs that attracted her attention bore the return address of Frazer's lawyer who had drawn the will. She had not known that any letter was due from him. In course of regular mail it would have come around by way of Tin Cow, so José must have taken something to the lawyer that she had not known of! And here was the reply!

She began to open the other communications, as if they were things that needed attention. She glanced through them quickly and then regarded

the one from the lawyer, addressed to Ed Frazer, "Personal." Her heart throbbed at its purport. The lawyer advised Frazer to wait until he could see him personally. He was not to try to draw up a home-made will that might have to stand a court test, in view of the friction between his wife and Prime. It was good lawyerlike advice. It revealed to Kate that Frazer had thought more on the matter of changing the will than she had suspected. She managed to reseal the letter without its appearing that it had been opened. Annuncio had been too busy with the patient to notice whether one or all of the letters had been opened. Possessed of this secret Kate tried to think how best it might be used in her peculiar service.

A stir outside told her of Prime's arrival. She spoke to Annuncio, bidding her let the girl in at once. As Annuncio started to do so, Kate made her way to the bed and began to use wet cloths and cool water upon the forehead of the stricken man. Prime came in, threw her hat on a stool, and sank on her knees beside the bed. Kate smiled at her a little, wiping all malice from her demeanor. Prime found herself almost at a disadvantage. This woman, whom she disliked, who hated her, seemed so forlorn, so weakened, by the shooting of her husband that the girl even had a tinge of pity for her then.

"Is he—will he—oh, tell me the worst," Prime implored.

"He has lived to this hour, that is all I can say," replied Kate, bending her head over the still form. Prime advanced to the head of the bed, and they faced each other across Frazer's body.

"I thank you for sending for me. I trust I may be of use."

"You're his daughter, Miss Prime," answered the

other, a supreme touch of mummery in tone and manner. "I do not hide my personal feeling toward you, but at such a time you've rights."

"Again I thank you. Let me stay until he is either out of danger or has——"

She had not the heart to finish with the fateful word. Kate nodded, as if in entire sympathy with the girl's point of view. She told her to make herself comfortable, adding that she knew where to find things, and what to do "in this house."

Prime was completely deceived by the woman's craft, and her own love for her father would have blinded her eyes to small errors in acting at such a time. She bent over to listen to the beating of Frazer's heart, and her face whitened still more at the febleness of it.

"He never can last until the doctor comes."

"Let us hope he will. Oh, if I could see him alive and well, alive and well as he was this morning, I'd be content to go away and live a beggar," Kate whispered.

Kate thought she could sense the love this woman bore for her father, and a feeling of pity conquered her aversion for the moment. "You may win him back, with a love like that. I almost wish we had not quarreled."

"You will feel different—afterward," Kate replied, with humility that cloaked her venom and cozened Prime the more.

All through the long hours, up until dark, the two women watched. Their hands touched, their impulses for service often were twinned in a common effort, and for the time their opposition each to the other slept.

All the hours, while Prime was so engrossed with her grief and anxiety, Kate's mind was upon one thing only, to the exclusion of all other thoughts.

"If Jim Easton runs the sign far enough he will find breaks in the sign that point toward Carl Trescott as the one who shot Frazer."

Long before dark Prime gave Kate the opening by sighing and saying:

"I wish Jim were here."

"So do I," Kate said unexpectedly.

"But he is needed where he is; he could do no good here."

"He may be comin' in; I can send a man to hurry him if he is."

Prime nodded gratefully. Kate got up, and went out and, once where Prime could not hear, translated the message into that imperative order for Jim's return that brought him away from Carl, just as Carl had shaken Jim's confidence in the hasty reading of the sign he had made on the way down.

The hours faded out; the dusk came, and then, when it was full dark, Jim came, riding hard. Prime met him and, because she was worried, saw no unusual thing in his having ridden so hard to her. She had a dozen things to suggest: that a relay of horses be sent out to hasten the coming in of the doctor; that some one be sent for Pete Brennan; that they organize for a thorough search of the trails in the morning. She noted the extra gun in his belt, and he told her it was Carl's. That was the first she knew that Trescott was taken, for her own words had tumbled out tumultuously, as she leaned against him, while Brilar was being taken away by a ready stable lad. She touched the butt of the gun, then shuddered.

"The weapon that downed dad! Have you looked at it?"

"Yes, three chambers empty. I didn't ask him whether he'd shot more than once at Ed."

"Oh, Jim, it's hard to believe Carl did this!"

"I know—I find myself not believing it. I won't till I've run the sign in the morning to my entire satisfaction. Carl insists that in my haste I over-ran something to his advantage. How is Ed?"

"Just alive!"

"Thank Heaven for that, Little Augur," he replied, his hand on her shoulder comfortingly, as in girlhood days, when she needed a touch of sympathy to hearten her during some trial of the spirit.

"Would Carl tell you anything?"

"He tells a pack o' stuff that I can't make head or tail of. Vangie was with him—had been kidnapped and taken to him, by her story; then, when I try to piece it out another way, it sounds different."

"Well, the Stranglers will sift it."

"Yes." His lips closed together, firm and white. "Take me in."

She took his hand, and they went in to the chamber, where Death and Life struggled. Kate, warned by the sound of his voice, was at Frazer's head, sitting on the bed, bathing his brow with cool cloths. Frazer was breathing better now, and Kate said his heart was stronger. She spoke ingratiatingly and humbly.

"Make yoreself to home, Mr. Easton. For now let us forget we've been at odds." Her long-lashed lids veiled her eyes; and her voice trembled.

Jim was taken in completely. He stood erect, gazing down on that face that he loved so well. His lips worked, then he spoke.

"I'd sure admire for to make th' noose for the devil that did it."

Kate was silent. A great tear brimmed from Prime's eye and spatted onto the bedclothes. Kate spoke with guileful purpose.

"Mr. Easton, when you two first left Bar Six—

excuse me for talkin' of it, but it's important—did you——”

“Yes, there may be things needin' attention. Go on,” Jim said, encouragingly, as he twirled his hat absently.

“When you first left Mr. Frazer he was angry. He insisted upon makin' a will. I tried to get him t' wait, but he was stubborn. You know how stubborn he c'd be.”

“Yes,” Prime said, wondering to what all this tended.

“I got him the other day to promise to amend the will. I told him you must have more'n th' law allows in a case where there is no will—two thirds, ain't it? I'm not good at lawyer bus'ness.” She appealed to Jim, who nodded his head.

“Well,” softly wiping the brow of the injured man with cool cloths, wrung out in cold water from an *olla*, hanging in the window space, “Ed, he sent to his lawyer in the Springs that he wanted a new will, and I got him to tear the other one up. His lawyer has a copy, as yo'll see, some day, I hope, an' it'll bear me out. In the mail that Al got from José was an answer from the lawyer. I wish yo'd open it an' read it. I want you two, at this time, an' while we're in trouble t'gether, to know that I've tried to be square.”

Mechanically, and because there was nothing else to do to occupy her mind, Prime took up the letter that Jim handed her. It bore out what the artful woman had said in every particular. Prime nodded and handed it to Kate, who pretended to read it carefully. Then she handed it to Jim, saying, as he read it:

“There, I'm glad Ed carried out my advice. When he gets back on his feet I'm in hopes he'll

make a new will, an' do what's right by us both. I can say to you two, across Ed's body here, that I hope we c'n all be friends again. I don't want to come between Ed an' his daughter. I've lived almost a man's life out here, and I've got some ha'sh ways, I s'pose, but——"

She paused in time to leave them with the right impression, and Jim went out, thinking it best to leave them together in that mood. He wished to be outside, where he could take charge of various matters, such as getting a relay of fast horses out on the Willow Springs trail to wait for the coming of the doctor and José; another band of saddlers, at Kate's request, out toward Brennan's place, to facilitate the coming of the elders of the region, who would act as judges, jurors and, he feared, as executioners, upon Carl Trescott.

Jim found the men discussing the weather, which had turned threatening again. There was a low rumble of thunder, and lightning winked an evil eye out in the west somewhere. Jim was uneasy over this, thinking of his promise to Carl to read in extreme detail the sign which he had run down so hastily. He had been hasty on that, but he had had the split-hoof trail to follow, and how could it be that two horses would appear upon the little-used trail of a sudden, each with a hoof split the same? That was what had impelled him to make speed whenever he had found the split-hoof track on soft spots. He brushed aside the idea that he could have erred.

He heard them coming then—the subdued curses of the men in advance, as they spoke to those already at the big house, letting them know that Carl was there. Jim strode at once toward the head of the column and forced his way to the prisoner's side. There was a movement among the men afoot,

as they saw Carl, and some spoke of summary action. Jim's voice rang out:

"Trescott is my prisoner. I'll kill a man that touches him until the judges make their ante."

Vangie rode forward and swung down. She went inside without a word. Men buzzed about, asking questions, getting half answers. Jim took the opportunity to order Carl to get down. He took the boy by one arm and started with him toward the extra bunk house, which they used in round-up times when they were apt to have many strange punchers. The house was of strong logs, with a big frame door. Jim placed trusty men to guard the windows and door, and, when he went out, he took Carl's boots. In that cactus-spangled land this meant that the boy would have to stay put until he could get something to protect the soles of his feet.

Carl, up to now, had maintained a stolid silence. The attitude of the men on the way up had frozen the boy's heart. But now he appealed to Jim again.

"Old-timer, you let a bet slide, down below there."

"What was it, Carl?" Jim asked kindly.

"I asked to have all my sign run. You only run part."

"Carl," said Jim, his strong voice trembling with emotion, "tell me everything yo've done to-day. Have you anything to hide? Let's sit down an' talk."

"No, I've not a thing to hide, old-timer," said Carl, as he dropped onto the edge of an empty bunk. Jim sat down on an up-ended box, facing him. They were in a half gloom now, for little light came in from outside.

"Now, piece it all together and give it all t' me, but short as you can. They may call me to th' big house any time."

Carl began to tell his story, how he intended to go

to see Vangie, therefore had ridden fast; how he had done his errand in Tin Cow and started home, been joined by the stranger, been held up, and so on. In thinking of it himself, it all seemed logical; told now in plain, short phrases, fired at Jim in a pell-mell effort to establish his innocence of a crime, it all seemed a hodgepodge of impossibilities. The boy stumbled and had to stop, where he had uncovered Vangie's eyes, and she had said he was a kidnaper.

"I don't know whether to laff or cry," he said, "at sich a foolish mess o' talk's that."

"It sounds like a lie, but you never did lie, Carl," Jim answered.

"I ain't lyin', an', if you keep yore word to me, you'll find it so when you run that sign complete. Yo'll find where I went to Tin Cow, came home with a man, was turned aside—though that last part may not show on that hard goin' on th' Tin Cow trail. You know where that is?"

Jim nodded. He knew where. He would go over it.

"Dozens in Tin Cow seen me," Carl said.

"Yes, but, by your own say, you left Tin Cow plumb early. You might been at the fork of th' trail in time to shoot Ed."

"I might, but I wasn't." His stubbornness was coming over him again at this proof of doubt. Carl had thought he needed only to state his case to be believed. Now he turned surly again.

"Well, if you want t' hang me innocent, all right; I'm only a kid, and there's got to be a victim, I s'pose. I got no fam'ly, so I won't be missed." His clean, bronzed face was stern; his voice bitter.

"Carl," said Jim, leaning forward and putting his strong hand on the boy's knee, "you won't hang innocent, I promise you that."

There was a patter on the roof, a whisper of wind past the door. Carl threw himself down onto the bunk, crying out in grim agony:

"What're yore promises worth? There comes th' rain. The sign'll be washed out, an' my chance of life with it. Go to blazes in a hand basket, Jim Easton. I wish I'd shot it out with you when you told me t' put up my hands."

The steady thrumming on the roof told Jim that the rain, indeed, had come. He tried to speak with Carl, but the boy shook off the kindly hand on his shoulder. Jim turned away.

Carl called after him: "Put a good guard on this shack. I won't wait for th' Strangers to pass on me, if I c'n get away. It's all stacked ag'inst me."

Jim went out and cautioned the guards not to let up their vigilance. Later he intended to have a man or two sleep inside. The men had had their slickers brought, and the warm rain was to be endured for a time.

"It will be only a shower," Jim said, his heart accusing him of a certain infidelity toward Carl, and he hoped the rain would not prove to be too severe.

If Kate Frazer showed any signs of elation at having managed matters so that the sign could not be all run out until the rain came, she did it while unobserved. The rain was rare music to her ears. She let Prime sit at the bed's head, and Vangie, who had come in, sat at the foot. Kate went out, apparently to give orders to the servants, but really to do something that the letter from Frazer's lawyer had made imperative, when linked with her statement to Jim and Prime about her having had Ed tear up the will. She got to the kitchen on a pretext of having orders to give as to the making of a broth, should Frazer revive and need nourishment.

At a moment when no one observed, she slid the four pieces of the destroyed will, bearing the indelible-ink notation in favor of Prime, into the front of the stove and watched them burned, the lid off the stove. A remnant of wood ash and embers remained from the supper fire, and it did the work effectually. She knew what she had done was for the best, from her viewpoint, and she was confident she could make Brazos see that they had not lost a trick in getting rid of the old will.

When Brazos had ridden away, Frazer had been thought to be dead, and she had to think of a way to get news to him in advance of his arrival at Bar Six, so that no untoward remark of his upon his return might give observant men a clew to a possible slip. Her mind was working at feverish speed on all angles of the situation, and even this small detail was caught in its logical focus. Brazos would be returning to-morrow. She would send a rider at dawn to meet him, with a note, apparently urging haste, really carrying the news she intended he should have. Meanwhile she would make Jim Easton take charge of the ranch, and thus keep him busy in that way. Then he would have less time to make embarrassing inquiries among the hands.

Kate went back into the room where Frazer was. Easton had just come in. He was uneasy. Kate told him to take charge of things outside.

"Jarve Larrabee, he'll be glad 'nuff to act under you again," she said. "I need a head, not a bull-head, now."

"I'll do what I c'n," he promised and went out. Vangie, watching him go, went outside under the gallery and plucked at Jim's sleeve.

"Big Jim, that rain cuts off Carl's chances."

"No, I think not."

"Did he tell you 'bout bein' held up an' all that?"

"Yes. I can't make a thing out of it. Can you?"

"No, 'cept Carl didn't shoot Ed Frazer."

"Got any real news on that, Vangie?"

"Only what my heart tells."

"Yo've learned to think a heap of Carl?" Jim asked kindly.

"Big Jim, I made a fool of myself once—a man that was apt to play with a girl might have made a fool of me. But you showed me th' better way. I don't love Carl with a fool love, like I thought love was once, but he's a good boy, an' no low-flung, sneaking fellows are goin' to put hemp on his pretty neck."

"Now, Vangie——"

"Big Jim, I said too much—I'm a fool complete. Only maw said Carl was sure to swing for this. She's wild!"

She was turning away, but she wheeled again:
"Jim, let me take Carl's supper down to him?"

"Why, yes, Vangie, if it'll please you."

"I'll just talk an' hearten him a little," she replied, low-voiced, tremulously eager now.

CHAPTER XXVI

THE STRANGLERS

WHO did it?" Pete Brennan demanded, as Brazos was brought in before him to tell the news.

A less subtle man would have voiced a sharp accusation. Brazos only replied: "I don't rightly know. I was told they suspect Trescott."

"That empty-haided, rollickin' devil! I don't believe it."

Old Pete wagged his head to and fro, and considered deeply.

"I'd hate to think so," Brazos said, falling in with Brennan's unbelief. He found it a good place to say: "Bar Six will have relay hosses above Dead Hole."

Pete smote the arm of his chair, a great steer's horn, highly polished with much rubbing of his elbows, and called: "Harry, send for Tad Fernstedt, Hime Brant, Frank Alley, Tighe Preston, Walt Hilton, Kedge Mack. Tell th' boys to ride. Have them head in to Dead Hole, and we'll pick them up on th' way down that trail. That'll save time."

Harry strode out into the night to hammer men out of C Diamond Tail bunk houses, and soon the thud of their horses' going was heard. Those Pete had summoned were the solid men of the region, no triflers, no brawlers, but men of steady, cool courage, any one of them fit to ride into the midst of a band of border ruffians and bring out his man, living or dead. All were men of some years; each could raise at a finger's snap a company of any needed strength of punchers from his own or near-by outfits to carry out any orders he or the

dread seven might issue. He had added Kedge Mack, because Frazer was on his back, for the Strangers might be of any number needed. Pete's brow was set, for he was asked to find the man who had shot his best friend.

"Sit down, Brazos," he said, noticing that Brazos was still afoot. "Yo're riding with Bar Six now?"

"Yes, sir, I'm helping out. I got my own business in Tin Cow, but trade is slack, an' Frazer needed a hand, so I came. Ed asked it as a favor."

Pete's keen, deep-set gray eyes searched the florid, handsome face, and Brazos felt the chill of that glance to his backbone, but he did not show it in the least.

"Brazos, yo're off th' prod?"

"I am, Mr. Brennan. I was more put upon than guilty, too."

"Let that be. Ed Frazer took you on; it must be O. K. Take some rest. We'll ride in a few hours."

Harry Brennan took Brazos to the bunk house, and he tumbled into a place left vacant by one of those who had gone for the Strangers.

A little beyond the turn of night they drummed Brazos out, and he came yawning, as befitted his part. Comet, ridden to the point of exhaustion, he left with Brennan's bunch; they gave him another good horse, and so he rode with old Pete and Harry.

The rain ceased not. Their slickers threw off the water, and the horses snuffed at the damp air gratefully. Their leathers did not creak, for they were wet and limp; their horses' hoofs at times fell so softly into mud that they seemed to be ghostly steeds, traveling through companies of mist wraiths, as the heated earth cast up the spume of the storm's wetness from her thirsty breast. As dawn was coming they picked up the relay of horses Jim had sent

out, and so they got news that Frazer was not dead, but at death's threshold.

The sun wheeled up to view them; coyotes, hymning the dawn, scattered off into the vastnesses of loneliness, at the thrumming of their speeding horses' hoofs. They spoke little, but got all out of their steeds that was in them, and so they came to the edge of Dead Hole to find most of the elders of the range land there. They swung down and gave their mounts the benefit of that much ease and a chance to crop at the gramma grass along that perilous rim. The tired Brennan horses they left there with the Bar Six men, who had brought the relay mounts. Farther on they waited again for the late comers.

"Do yo' know what I've thought, ridin' along this rampart?" Pete Brennan suddenly asked them all.

"What?" Kedge Mack queried.

"What a place for a herd to stampede over. Take that mesa off there to th' west—Bar Six often has its round-up out there. Let th' cattle get away, headed this direction, nothin' would turn them."

They wagged their beards at this sage summing up. The laggard ones soon came in, and then, at Brennan's order, they started toward the Bar Six. Now they were all together, and the frontier court was ready for business at any time. Across toward Bar Six they reached and came swirling up to the corrals in the afternoon, and Pete Brennan at once strode stiff-leggedly toward the big house, while a dozen men hastened to make sure that none of these judges of the range lacked anything essential to comfort. Jarvis Larrabee did the honors of Bar Six for them, and subdued talk of the event that had brought them together was had, while they all waited for Pete's return. Easton was in the big house.

Pete was shown into the room where Frazer was. There he stood at the foot of the bed and gazed long at the face that was so strangely quiet. Pete looked and asked: "Missus Frazer, what's Ed's chance?"

"Hardly any, I'm afraid." And so it seemed to Brennan, accustomed as he was to viewing dead or dying men. Yet there was something in the aspect of this broken friend that was new to Pete. He bent over and listened to the breathing of Frazer. It was regular now, but not deep; then Pete listened to the steady throb of his friend's great heart. He tapped the huge, arching chest.

"Ed's got a bellows an' heart that'll stand a whole lot. Once let a range-bred man get his breath an' he'll make th' ford."

He took Kate's hand and pressed it; then he went to Prime and put his arm about her shoulder softly. He wrung Easton's hand and went out, his jaw set. Easton was at his heels. Prime called:

"Be fair to Carl."

"He ought to swing; he did it," Kate said decisively.

Old Pete wheeled, and his gray eyes flashed, as he studied their intent faces. Prime's young lips were parted in wistfulness; the older woman's were white and harsh.

Without speaking, Pete wheeled again. Outside, men fell away from the rigor of his countenance, for he carried with him the majesty of their law—not the law of courts that sit under domed roofs and hear the droning addresses of paid lawyers, but the majesty of range law, swift, certain, terrible. Pete spoke no word, but went toward the lower level, where the others were. Here a low building had been cleared of buckboard, chuck wagon, and other things, and now it stood empty for their proper use.

The Stranglers had been in the saddle most of the night, and all that day, and many of them had ridden far on their own errands, the day before. But they were men of iron or bronze, and in the face of duty they knew not fatigue. To judge the case now, while the evidence was fresh, was their purpose. Headed by Pete they strode into the barnlike structure that was become the temple of justice. Every one who could came in, for it was an open session, not a secret one like those at which some hidden move against uncaught criminals was often planned. None of those men had a warrant from governor or president giving him powers of high or low justice; none of them had been elected by the people's suffrages, cast in a ballot box. Each stood on his own two feet, and his power was in the deadly guns, belted on each, and in the dread and fear their fame inspired.

On another case, a hundred miles away, the court would not be the same; Brennan and Mack would be out of it, their places taken by other tried men of that farther country. The Stranglers had no certain membership; they appeared and disappeared; struck and withheld their strokes; but in some rough way they meted out justice. At times dark counsels prevailed, and personal wrongs were righted under cover of sudden, secret trials, but in such cases the violators of the Stranglers' law themselves paid the penalty, when the facts became known.

In a fair fight in the open a man might kill his opponent, and the Stranglers would not stir a finger. A man who shot a horse thief, taken in flagrant evil, needed but point to the horse and the absence of a valid bill of sale, giving the slain man title thereto. Cattle rustlers, like vermin, could be shot, and no questions were asked. A man wronged in family honor could slay, and no one accused him.

But for the assassin, the tinhorn gambler, the keeper of the resort that made range men sots, the Strangers had short shift.

A board across two barrels was the bar of justice. Up-ended boxes furnished seats for the court. They took them, and Pete in the center, with Tad Fernstedt, Hime Brant, and Frank Alley at his right, with Tighe Preston, Walton Hilton, and Kedge Mack at his left, sat down. Pete slatted his hat onto the board; the others did likewise. Their guns leaped out and were laid, two by two, in front of each, triggers rigid. The guns were at half cock, both for safety and for quick use. No other man who entered had a gun; all weapons were left in a pile outside, under guard of two Bar Six men. The rain had ceased, and there was a burst of late afternoon sunshine. Easton faced the grim seven across the board. Pete spoke:

"Bring in th' prisoner."

"And a new rope," Hime Brant said.

Easton rapped out an order, and some one went for the rope. Jim brought in the accused. Carl was placed on a nail keg facing the court; then the rope was handed to Brant, whose practiced fingers began to form the easy-sliding knot, laid ring upon ring upon the bight—the hangman's noose. He laid the neat coil down, with the ominous knot atop, and viewed it with workmanlike satisfaction. Frank Alley leaned his thin form over from the hips and poked at the knot with a long, slim trigger finger.

"It'll work fine an' dandy!"

The men were coming in quietly, and the tale of them was full. Pete said:

"State th' charge."

"Cold-turkey killin'," said Jarvis Larrabee, speaking up for Bar Six.

"Any one see it?" asked Pete, going straight to the point.

"No," replied Larrabee, without quibble, for this court would have none. It acted as prosecuting attorney, as attorney for the defense, as judge, as jury. Perhaps later it would act as executioner.

"Who found Ed down?" Kedge Mack demanded.

"Silent an' Pecos. Missus Kate, she came 'bout th' same time, hunting for Vangie, who'd gone to meet Trescott."

"Let 'em talk," Pete ordered.

Silent came, his loquacity gone in that presence. Yes, he had seen Tom Tucker riderless, and he knew it meant trouble. He and Pecos had backtracked Tom Tucker to the body. Mrs. Frazer happened along just then, from Circle Dot X, looking for Vangie. They had seen the tracks of the split-hoof hoss, going toward Tin Cow and coming back. Carl's Sour Face had a split hoof behind, yes. The sign showed that he had concealed himself behind an organ cactus and shot. On coming to look at the body his horse had reared, and he had dropped the neckcloth. It was produced and thrown onto the table. Pecos corroborated Silent exactly.

Mrs. Frazer was called. She had gone to seek Vangie, for Ed and herself had agreed the girl ought to be at Bar Six. She had arrived where Frazer was, soon after Silent and Pecos. Had seen no one on the trail coming. She had ridden over to Circle Dot X by way of Dead Hole. Did she know of any reason why Carl should dislike Frazer? Frazer had told him not to court her daughter, Vangie, any more. They had had high words on the South Springs trail over it. Carl had made threats.

Here Carl started and colored; his lips trembled. "That last is a lie, entire," he exclaimed.

Pete's right-hand gun pointed at the boy. "No more o' that; yo'll get yore turn later."

Had any one else seen the quarrel? Carl was accused, Ed was dead, and she was the sole witness, aside from victim and accused.

No one else, she thought. They probably were alone down there that day. Then Bob Grant said: "I was close by, close enough to see them meet, and that Frazer shook a fist at Carl. We kidded him later about it."

"We?" Tighe Preston asked, with entire disregard of legal formalities, but with direct emphasis upon a needed point.

"I mean me an' Brazos; he was with me."

"Brazos!" Pete called. There was no delay before that court, no chance for quibble. Those grim judges followed simply where the testimony led.

He came from the rear, diffident, his handsome face in high color, his big black eyes showing to advantage. He was deferential to the court, talked in low tones, but his voice was distinct. He had seen Frazer shake a fist at Carl, and by Carl's attitude he knew they were quarreling. He hated to say this, for Carl was his friend. Brazos threw a glance aslant at the boy, who was sitting there, his head bowed, his shoulders drawn in. Now the lad straightened, and his eye flashed.

"Cut out th' chow! We had words over Vangie. Let that bet lie."

"You admit it, then?" Pete asked.

"Yes, sir." Then his head went down again, and his shoulders narrowed.

In answer to Pete Brennan's succeeding queries Brazos told how he was north of Bar Six house when the shooting occurred, and how he had been sent to ride for the committee, because he was known to have a good horse. The glances of the

judges played over the large, handsome man, and then he felt as though a cold flame had gone over him. Pete nodded a curt dismissal, and he went into the crowd. They told Mrs. Frazer to go. Pete called for Vangie, who came.

The warm-hearted girl gave Carl a glance of affection, and the next moment she had stepped to his side and put her arm about his shoulders, as a mother might have done. She laid her high-colored cheek alongside his, on which the beard was not yet hardened by the years, and spoke some low, heartening word. Carl smiled as Vangie faced the seven again.

Name? Evangeline Taliafero Bradon. She had received a note the night before the shooting? Yes. Where was the note? She produced it, for she had carried it with her. It was the first note she'd ever had from Carl. Slab-sided, homely Tad Fernstedt here cut in, quite unlawyerlike, but direct to the point:

"Let the accused write a line, so't we c'n compare."

Carl was given a pencil and a scrap of an old envelope from Pete's pocket. Carl composed his sentence and signed his name.

The court looked at the paper, the witness meanwhile waiting, while the two writings were compared. Tighe Preston thrust out his square-set jaw, fixed Carl with his pale green-brown orbs and demanded, seemingly quite aside from the line of testimony:

"Many here ever notice yore writin'?"

"Not that I know on, sir," Carl answered, without trying to curry favor by a long-winded attempt to drag in another person without cause. Tighe nodded.

"These writin's are alike, but they may not be

th' same," Pete announced, handing them over the heads of the nearest and asking that they be passed around. This court had no highly paid handwriting experts. It could only let the writing be judged by accusers and friends alike.

As different ones looked at the two bits of paper, the members of the dread court whispered together. Vangie, biting her pretty lip, sighed and sagged over onto the other hip, as a horse will do when kept too long in a place to suit his ideas of comfort.

"Brazos, yo've got 'em?" Pete Brennan suddenly asked. "Are they like? Yo've been with Carl a lot. Know his John Hancock?"

The people watched Brazos wonderingly. He, quiet, assured, handed the papers to Jim Easton, remarking merely:

"I'd say not much alike. Ya'es, I know Tres' hen marks, fine an' dandy. I hate to say so, but them writin's is some alike. P'r'aps not much, but, still—I guess I'll shet up entire."

Several of the court whispered to Pete at that, and he nodded. The scraps of paper came back and were tabled for the time. Then Pete said to Vangie:

"Now, Vangie, go on. You went to th' fork o' th' trail?"

She had gone there, yes, sir. She produced her gum and by its aid chewed out the remainder of her tale. When almost there a heavy-bearded man had thrown a gun in her face, spurring his horse from behind a clump of heavy mesquite across her path. He had bound her, forced her to go aside with him. She had not recognized him. The beard might have been false. She had not thought of that. There was something about his eyes that reminded her of—she wished she might think.

Carl's eyes were upon her at that word, but she could not come at the thought that was just around

the corner from her apprehension, it seemed. The man who had captured her did not offer her violence, aside from holding her prisoner. He went away after a while, leaving her tied up and her horse cropping grass close at hand. They were then far off the trail. After a time he came back and took her away, blindfolding her and binding her feet under the pinto's belly. She was finally halted, and after a time her captor seemed to hold a whispered conversation with——

"Seemed?" Walt Hinton asked, most unjuristlike, yet strangely to the point.

"Well, I heard that black-bearded man make like he was a-talking to some one."

"Make like it?" Pete demanded. "Now was it a one or two-barreled parley?"

"I don't know for sure."

"Yo're not tryin' t' shield yore sweethea't?" Frank Alley demanded.

Vangie shot out her lip at him, then sucked it in, showing that deep crease. She replied waspishly enough: "I wouldn't harm him—anywise."

There followed a single cackle of laughter, that died as it was born.

"Who laughed?" Pete shouted, his eyes playing over the crowd like a flame.

"I did," said Brazos, for a dozen people were looking at him.

"Mighty poor time," Pete said, then he urged Vangie to speak.

After this talk, that she thought was between her captor and Carl, and of which she gave the details, she heard the shot, heard a man riding off suddenly, and then Carl came and released her. She had accused him of conniving at her kidnaping, but he had denied this and had told her a story.

"Never mind his story; he'll tell it himself," Tad

Fernstedt declared. Tad had another idea, most unlawful, but direct. "Are you sure that's th' same note Trescott sent you? You ain't faked up one, to fool th' court?"

"No; I ain't tryin' to fool this court," she replied sharply. "I'm tryin' to tell what happened, if I c'n."

"Call Trescott!" Pete gave the order in a crisp tone. Trescott got up and faced them, his face showing warm color on the cheeks, but under his eyes were dark circles. His fine, slim hands he had folded, one inside the other, before his well-formed chest.

Name? Carlos Anthony Trescott. Lived at Bar Six since he was a boy. Father had been a hand for Frazer. Mother a half Mexican—a good woman, please the court. The court waved her aside, as irrelevant, seemingly. He had been ordered to ride to Tin Cow for the mail. He had gone there straight, riding hard, for he wanted to be back early, and so have time to go out to Circle Dot X on the way back and see Vangie. Why? Well, he had had a quarrel with Frazer the day before over Vangie, and he wanted to ask her to elope with him and set up housekeeping with him on the next ranch he hired out with. The court glanced about meaningly at that. He had hurried his business in Tin Cow. On the way out he had been accosted by a man, an experienced hand, he'd say. The man explained that he was riding for Bar Six to fill a bunk for the coming busy season. Gave the name of Walt Gresham. Lantern-jawed hombre. He had offered to ride with Carl, and they had fared forth together. Part way to the fork of the trail the man had suddenly covered him and——

Carl began a most circumstantial narration of the events of those few hours. He had painfully rehearsed them all night, for he meant to be truth-

ful. But now their very baldness had no substance of ponderable facts, it seemed to him, and he could discern that the judges were amazed at the story. He went through to the end.

Pete cross-questioned him. "He held you up, took no coin, made a sucker o' you, and left both hoss an' gun—the gun loaded for you to pick up? Didn't rifle th' mail?"

"Jus' as I say, Mr. Brennan," replied Carl, with none of the born liar's ready glibness to help him out.

"That story's too thin!" Hime Brant exclaimed.

"I know it is," answered Carl most unexpectedly. "I've called myself a liar a dozen times after telling it to myself."

"Why tell it to us, then?" Kedge Mack wanted to know, and the faces of the spectators showed they agreed with Kedge.

"If I was a liar I'd tell a story that had a chanct to be thought true," quickly retorted Carl.

"Did you write a note to Vangie to meet you?"

"I didn't need to. I c'n ride some."

Hardly an answer to be made to a court of formal law, yet this court of justice found no fault. Why? Because Carl talked man talk; he did not whine.

Jim Easton was called. Name? James Easton. Born? Tom Green County, Texas. Knew nothing of the case until Bob Grant rode in to Circle Dot X for Prime Frazer. Went with her to the trail fork. Left her there and rode down the sign. Some one should have done that at once, but they were busy with the wounded man. He had seen where the split-hoof horse had come from Tín Cow, had gone behind the cactus into ambush, and so on. He had run the sign down to the south, keeping it in sight."

"All the way?" Hime Brant asked.

"I felt sure. It was broad open."

"All the way?" Pete Brennan persisted.

"I think I may have missed some of it, but I saw it as often as I rode. Horses with split hoofs ain't plentiful."

"No," thoughtfully answered several of the seven.

"He promised me he'd have my sign run out so that I c'd prove I really was held up an' bamboozled into going down that way," Carl declared. He was pointing an accusing finger at Big Jim, who turned aside his head.

"I did promise, but the rain came too soon."

"Not if yo'd kept yore promise," replied Carl.

"I was tryin' to help th' womenfolks in their trouble, and it got beyond me, Carl," Jim said softly.

Carl wiped his sweating brow, then he said: "I forgot them. I beg yore pardon and the pardon of this court. I ought to have remembered 'bout them women before."

The court severally received the pardon with gracious negligence.

"Yo're a good friend o' this boy?" Pete Brennan asked Jim.

"I made him a hand, sir."

The seven nodded understandingly.

"You wouldn't want no harm to come to him?" Hime queried.

"No, sir, but I want Ed Frazer's enemy killed."

"Same here," said several, of whom Brazos was the leader.

"Who spoke first?" Kedge Mack asked, his cold eyes searching the room.

It was Brazos—yes, he admitted it. Frazer was his boss, wasn't he? He had spoken so. Thought it time some one spoke up.

"Mighty poor time," Kedge declared, sitting down.

"Git out! You run to conversation too fast to please this portion o' this court."

Brazos went, humbly enough.

"I sent a man to Tin Cow to-day," Easton went on, "Pecos Honeyman. He reports that Carl was in there early that day, an' rode out from town alone. Pecos said that slab-jawed stranger didn't ride out with Carl."

Pecos confirmed this testimony promptly. Carl winced dumbly.

"That was a good idea," Tad Fernstedt declared.

Pete Brennan glanced at his colleagues and raised his eyebrows slightly. Brant fingered the knotted rope meaningly. Pete shook his head slowly, decidedly.

"The court wishes to be alone. Take th' prisoner away."

They were thus dismissed and went out to belt on their guns again, and thus becoming full-fledged citizens of the open ranges, able to cast their votes from rifled barrels on any and all questions affecting their interests.

Carl was led to the extra bunk house, and the dusk was falling as he went in. The guards were set. The hands began to stroll about and talk. Brazos was ordered to come to the house for orders from Mrs. Frazer. Report had it that Ed Frazer was resting about as he had been.

From inside the court's abode voices came out, showing that the case was being threshed over. Once Frank Alley's high-pitched tones were heard: "Vangie, she'd lie t' save him. She might've scribbled another note, so Carl's writin' wouldn't agree with the note she showed us."

Once Pete Brennan remarked, so that it was heard:

"All Bar Six folk seem accounted for on that day

except Trescott. He was in a way to be near where Ed was shot."

"But not if he went where that stranger told him with his gun," said Tighe Preston.

"That stranger might on'y been some Mexican ridin' for a job an' plumb harmless. We c'n ask Missus Frazer or Jarve Larrabee later if they had such a hand coming in," Hilton said. "Accordin' to Pecos' say-so that stranger may be some vanisher."

"Jim Easton, he's soft-hearted toward that boy," the listeners heard Pete Brennan remark emphatically.

Their voices dropped then, and no more was heard, and the people expected a verdict. They heard the boxes, used as seats, falling over, as the members of the court got up; then they heard Hime Brant remark:

"I might's well bring out th' rope."

There came a clatter of hoofs up the trail. José Almonté, his olive face turned gray, reeled from the saddle and fell into the arms of Jim Easton. His full lips were not red as cherries now, but livid and hard-drawn, and his eyes were set in little red rings, it seemed, for they burned from lack of sleep, and too much glaring sun.

"The doctor?" Jim asked.

"He rides! Let me sleep!" Then the light rider's steely endurance snapped. Two men picked him up and carried him, stiffening already in comalike slumber, toward the bunk house.

"Five days in th' saddle, except for two li'l sleeps, th' first two goin' over to Willow Springs with those letters," Jim declared.

"He'd ride a shooting star to th' moon an' back if he c'd get it 'tween his laigs," Bob Grant said.

They nodded. The court, hearing the doctor was due, waited. Hime Brant toyed with the rope,

for he had pride in his craft. Vangie looked at him shudderingly, then toward the extra bunk house! Now she clutched at her bosom! In there, against her flesh, was a vial of laudanum she had taken from her mother's medicine chest.

Afar they descried Doctor Lyman Hershey, coming fast. He whooped his horse into their midst, and a dozen helped him down, while others undid his medicine case from off the cantle of the saddle.

"He's alive, then?" the man of healing asked. "Well, if he is, he'll get well. You low-flung cowmen can live without any brains or legs."

He shoved his way wearily from amongst them, Jim at his side.

"Let us know how he is. We've got to know," Pete Brennan said, as he detained them at the door.

Doctor Hershey nodded, after a glance at Brant's rope. "No cure for that, though," he said.

Brant sat down, his back to the wall of the big house. He got out his pipe and filled it. The others lounged about. Talk sagged off to ordinary affairs, as they eased the tension of the moment by setting their tongues awag on simple matters. Hime's rope, neatly piled, was beside him. Vangie, strolling by, her face drawn, her hand still at her bosom, stopped before him. She thrust out the toe of her right foot and kicked at the rope, knocking the orderly coils all apart. Hime scowled up at her.

"A dirty piece of rope," she declared.

"I think it's right clean," he replied patiently.

Easton came out, his face showing neither hope nor deep dejection. A score of men sprang to him for news.

"Doc, he says Frazer's due to be abed a long time. Bullet's lodged against his spine, an' there's a big red clot hardened all around th' spinal column.

Doc's goin' to get th' ball out, an' then it all depends on how strong Big Augur's constitution is."

"He'll make th' ford," Pecos said.

"You can't keep a range man down," Silent declared.

Men moved about more freely, and hope was higher. The dark had come fully. Soon Pete Brennan and the six came out.

Pete beckoned to Easton and announced: "Doc Hershey hopes Frazer may speak after he gets the bullet out. We're goin' to wait to see if mebbe Ed saw th' shooter."

Vangie, close at hand strangely enough, glanced toward the extra bunk house, and her hand went to her bosom.

They began to scatter now for supper. The big house kitchen and the cook house for the men were kept busy feeding them all. Vangie got a basket of good things for Carl and went to him, as she had gone at each mealtime so far. The man guarding the door passed her in, and she smiled at him and slipped to him a small flask of something to drink. She had done the same at morning and noon mealtimes, and her gift had been received with a smile. The pluck of the girl in standing up for the prisoner in court had been commended. The cowmen all liked the girl.

Inside she found Carl bright and cheerful. He kissed her, and she drew close to him, while he sat on the bunk and ate. They whispered together. "But they keep that rope ready. I'm 'fraid that they won't believe that story o' yorn," she said.

"I don't believe it myself. That's the trouble with truth—it's too plain to be interesting sometimes."

"Well, then?" she asked, whispering lower.

Soon she came out. At the kitchen door of the big house, she saw Hime Brant again, the rope coiled, and his arm thrust through the coil. She glanced toward the bunk house again and clutched at her bosom. Leaving the basket Vangie went out. She was in time to hear the word from the sick chamber:-

"The bullet is out, but Frazer hasn't woke up yet."

The interest now was all at the big house. The bunk houses were deserted, except for the guards over Carl. Men edged in about the big house and sat along the walls, their backs to the house, smoking, talking in low tones. Vangie heard a group, of which Brazos was the center, discussing whether it were best "to hang him if Ed got worse."

"Stranglers or none?" Bob Grant asked.

"I ain't said so yet," Brazos answered.

Vangie passed on and then back along the house, and then she was seen no more by the men. She got her mother aside indoors, and Kate told her Carl was doomed, "unless some one helps him to escape." Then Vangie vanished entirely. After a time Pete Brennan came out of the big house, where he had gone to smoke with Easton. He called the six together, and with Jim they went toward the extra bunk house.

"I want to see if Trescott's kept close," Pete explained. "We'll do nothin' till morning."

At the threshold he stumbled over something. Jim bent over, and his match showed the face of the guard, Pecos, this time. He was sound asleep, and a heavy odor came with his breath.

"Drugged!" Jim exclaimed, leaping inside. "Laudanum!"

The bunk was empty, and Carl was gone! In

the midst of the confusion some one called that Vangie was gone from the big house.

Now a whirlwind of effort followed. Lanterns gleamed; skilled men searched for the signs of their going. The split-hoof track of old Sour Face was found in a soft place, left by the recent rain. The small tracks of Vangie's pinto horse were beside them.

"We'll catch those two babes easy," Pete said grimly. "I'm sorry th' li'l' fool got him t' run off—looks like a confession of guilt."

"Why?" demanded Jim. "I didn't suspect anything like this."

"We hadn't agreed on a verdict. We was for holding him for a while till we looked up some points that don't seem clear. This slopin' thisaway looks bad entire."

"I think he shot Ed now," Kedge Mack said to Jim.

The others nodded.

"Too bad," Jim remarked.

The search for Carl and Vangie was fruitless. The guard over the saddle horses had been lured to the big house in hopes of finding news. On his return he had found the horses gone, and now he came to report that fact. Carl and Vangie had trailed out, mounted bareback on some sober cow horse they knew; then they had ridden off on hard ground to the north, in the midst of the horses. The saddlers had scattered here and there. Which had carried them? After hours of riding to collect the horses the fugitives were still at large.

"Shrewdest get-away I ever see," Pete Brennan declared.

CHAPTER XXVII

FRAZER SPEAKS

WHILE men were so busy with the search for the fugitives, another sort of drama was being enacted around the bed of the stricken cattle king.

Doctor Hershey, quiet, attentive, watched the patient with unremitting alertness. Prime, at one side of the bed, wavered not in her attempts to be of help. The girl was finding some solace for her anxiety in this service of love. She had not taken off her garments for even a moment of rest, except that she had laid aside the pair of little silver-mounted spurs and thrown her hat into a corner.

Kate Frazer, on the bed's other side, was firm and still, carrying out the orders of the physician exactly, and so gaining his praise. Annuncio, in and out, often speaking to her mistress in a low tone, that the quietude of the sick room might not be violated, perhaps, brought in cool drinks for the watchers and water for the doctor to use in his ministrations.

First the doctor had lanced the great lump alongside Frazer's spine, and from it he had extracted the .38 bullet. Carl's gun was of that caliber, and Hershey had shaken his head and had had Brennan informed on that point. That narrowed the limit of suspicion somewhat.

From the lump alongside Frazer's spine came not only the bullet, but a great quantity of red fluid that had clotted there. The spine had been grazed; one of the vertebrae was shorn of a bit

of its substance; the resulting shock had brought about a paralysis that involved all but the injured man's eyes. At times they glowed for a moment, when he was aroused into partial wakefulness, only to sink into a deathlike coma in the intervals.

Along toward morning Doctor Hershey went out. Prime watched him go and noted that his brow was lined in thought. Kate Frazer followed him, and Prime heard her urging the man of medicine to rest. She reflected then that, if Kate was or had been at odds with her, at least Kate had good qualities. Her care for the patient was unremitting, and her thought for the comfort of the many, whom the event had cast upon their hospitality, never flagged.

Prime sighed and wished for a moment that she might be at peace with this woman. Vangie's going by now was known to Prime, and a great sorrow had fallen upon her on that account. Vangie had been good company for Prime, and Prime felt there was no harm in the girl. As for Carl, upon whom she had looked almost as a younger brother, Prime was genuinely sorry that the boy had run away. It seemed like a plain confession of guilt.

After a time Kate came back alone. As she entered the doorway, her eyes rested upon Prime's intent features, for the girl was watching her father's chest rise and fall. His eyes flicked open, and they seemed to hold the girl's gaze—then went vacant again. The lamp, turned low, did not give enough illumination to make it sure, but Prime leaned closer to her father and waited, her hands clasped before her bosom.

Kate stepped forward, with a little cough that startled Prime, who had not known the woman was in the room again. Annuncio glanced at her mis-

truss for orders, but Kate shook her head without Prime's noticing it.

"The doctor has stepped out to smoke," Kate explained. "I followed him out and made him talk. I thought he'd been keeping something back."

"Yes?" Prime's attention was fixed.

"He says your father may need a powerful stimulant to make him speak, in order to find out if he saw the person who shot him, but he will not give it just now. Why don't you get a cup o' coffee; you can't go on thisaway always."

Prime, with her resentment dulled, her suspicions against this woman asleep, yielded. She did feel a bit faint, and she thought the coffee would do her good. Annuncio got up and went with her to the kitchen. She found a pot of strong coffee on the back of the stove that yet held some warmth. Prime sat down at a kitchen table with her coffee, and the taste of it was good in her parched mouth.

Annuncio asked Prime if she wished for anything more. Prime replied in the negative. Annuncio went out quietly, yet at the door she cast a glance aslant at the back of the girl, then smiled an evil smile that distorted her leathern features rather than hinted at any mirth. Going to the bedroom Annuncio passed a quick shrug of her thin shoulders over Doctor Hershey's head to Kate, whose features did not change, as she listened to the doctor.

"When I give this injection to him I want you two to listen and see if he speaks. I shall listen, too, as soon as I put the syringe away. It will take a moment for the injection to work."

The doctor bent over, as Kate listened from one side of the bed, and Annuncio at the other.

"Where is Miss Frazer? She ought to be here,"

Hershey said, as he held the point of the tiny needle at Frazer's limp wrist.

"She said she was tired and went for some coffee. She'll be right in," Kate replied.

Hershey nodded, as the syringe's needle was plunged into Frazer's wrist. He sent the stimulant into the stricken man's flesh and got up to put the instrument away, after he had let the punctured wrist fall upon the bedclothes. As he watched the patient from the side of the room, where his medicine case was against the wall, he saw the two women suddenly bend over and listen.

Rising to his feet, the doctor could see Frazer's eyes, gleaming momentarily over the round of Kate's warm-colored head. As the stimulant bit his consciousness more and more poignantly, Frazer rolled his eyes spasmodically. Hershey heard the whispering of the two women bending over, heard a hoarse, muffled gurgle from Frazer, then a few choking words—and then one word clearly: "Prime."

Quickly the eyes, that had gleamed, faded to vacuity, and the women straightened up together. Plainly Frazer was unconscious again.

"Well?" Hershey demanded.

"He said it was Trescott," Kate said bitterly.

"Eet was so," Annuncio affirmed. "Señor Fraz-i-er, he blamed the Señor Carlos."

"Did I hear him mention his daughter's name?" Hershey demanded quickly.

"Yes," Kate steadily replied. "They had a quarrel—this is a family matter, but yo're our doctor, so yo' c'n know and it won't hurt. Prime quit Bar Six to live in Circle Dot X. There's been bad feelings between Ed an' her over it. I don't like to say what he said 'bout her. Mebbe it was only sick-crazy talk."

"I ought to know. Pete Brennan will ask," Hershey insisted.

Kate held her tongue, and Annuncio took up the tale.

"Dhe Señor Fraz-i-er, he say Mees Prime, no child of his. She mus' kip 'way from Bar Seex."

"Annuncio!" Kate made a gesture of displeasure. "You shouldn't have said that."

Annuncio grumbled, but Doctor Hershey got the impression that Kate was trying to make it easier for Prime. He had no reason to distrust the two women. He had a broken leg to set, fifty miles below, and a gunshot wound, with internal complications, to dress, twenty miles to the east. He wanted a little rest and then a mount. His practice was scattered over a territory empirelike in area, peopled by folk who made surgery needful in their work, play, hates, loves, and greeds.

Hershey told the women that he had done all he could. Leaving directions that Frazer be kept quiet, free from shocks, he promised to return when he could. He was only one doctor to a wide-flung population, and no one patient could keep him at his bedside, no matter what the fee.

"Nature will have to fight this out with Ed Frazer," he told Kate; then he went to lie down on a blanket in a corner of an outside room and soon he was in a deep sleep.

Prime, her coffee finished, started toward the bedroom again. Dawn was coming slowly. Prime found the women busy about the room, setting things to rights. She was about to take part in this little labor, when she noted that there was a change in the atmosphere, as regarded herself. Her first move was to reach for a chair that needed pushing against the wall. Annuncio grasped the chair with force and set it back expertly; her

gesture showed that she wished Prime away. Kate hardly gave a glance to the astonished girl. Prime turned toward the bed, and they were between her and it. She was about to force her way past when she heard men's voices, hushed and expectant. Then Pete Brennan came in, with Jim Easton and the other six members of the Stranglers. Kate went to them and answered Pete's query as to why they had been sent for.

"Doctor Hershey said t' tell you that he gave Ed a jolt in the arm—some big medicine. Ed rallied and spoke."

"Why wasn't I here?" Prime demanded.

"Why sh'd I know?" Kate asked sharply. "If yo'd rather drink coffee an' rest in the kitchen than watch at yore father's bedside at a time like this——" Kate shrugged her shoulders, and her palms went out.

Prime's face, that had been so white, went scarlet now, then paled again, while the grim men watched.

Only Jim, coming to Prime, laid a hand on her shoulder and spoke. "Sit deep in th' saddle an' ride, Prime, girl."

That steadied her. Her flashing glance told him so.

"But what did Ed say?" Brennan demanded.

"He said it was Trescott; and he said he didn't want Prime around; yo're no child o' hisn." There was enough hesitancy on this last to make the seven feel that she hated to utter such words. But Jim was not deceived. He did not care to start an argument in the sick room, however.

"We got nothin' to do with any private war between Ed an' you, Prime," Pete informed her, "but what he said 'bout Carl was important."

"How do we know he said just that?" Jim demanded.

"Ask Doctor Hershey; he was in th' room." Kate told the half truth that so often is more dangerous than a complete lie. "Ask Annuncio."

They questioned her with their eager eyes, and the Mexican woman gave a surly confirmation that was effective because it was not pressed upon them.

Brennan and the others went out to speed certain measures then afoot for searching for Carl and Vangie. Jim and Prime, left together with the two women, were ill at ease. Jim thought once of shaking Hershey awake to make sure that Kate and Annuncio had not lied. The flight of Carl had made him chary of anything favoring the accused, and so that part of Frazer's supposed talk he accepted. There was nothing strange, either, in Frazer's having, as Kate said, reverted to his differences with Prime. Jim advised Prime to let matters rest for a moment, and he drew her outside that zone of feminine hostility to the room she had always used. Here he made her lie down.

Prime had gone about as far as a healthy young person can without sleep. The intention to remain awake was strong in her, but sleep took her, even as she opposed its strivings for the mastery. Jim, occupied with a dozen matters connected with the pursuit and providing of mounts, went out.

When Jim returned it was fully daylight. Hershey, who had been given a mount from the Bar Six saddle band at the order of Kate Frazer, had gone. Hershey had inspected his patient before going and had given it as his opinion that Frazer might live for a long time in his then condition. There was nothing the doctor could do; nature must fight it out. He must be guarded from all shocks.

"Some one ought to go up to Circle Dot X to reassure Miss Bolton," Jim said to Prime, when

the latter appeared. He described the state of affairs, and she asked for her father.

Jim told her what Hershey had said, and Prime, at Jim's instance, sent for Kate to come out from the bedroom. She came just to the door and stood, with her back to the jamb, as if to guard the sick room from intrusion by them.

"Well, what is it?" she asked, all the conciliation gone from her manner and tongue.

"I'd like to know my position here," Prime said quietly, her face drawn, her eyes brilliant with excitement.

"Your position?" Kate asked, while one white, capable hand brushed back a wisp of warm-toned hair.

"Yes," replied Prime, tapping sharply on the floor with the toe of her boot. "Come, you know what I mean."

"I didn't know you had any position here," replied Kate, a note of scorn in her tones.

"No," said Prime, "not since you came in. But may I come to see my father? I must come."

"Oh, as to that, come. But the doctor has said he must be spared all shocks."

"I understand that. I'll hold myself in. All I want is to see his face, to lay my hand on his. Can't you see what I want?"

"I am his wife. The doctor has left him in my care, and I don't intend to have any pulin' sentiment kill my man," declared Kate savagely.

Jim put his hand on Prime's shoulder. "I wouldn't beg of her, Prime. Yo've done what you can. Go 'way now."

With an effort Prime wrenched herself loose, and her voice rang clear: "There is something false and wrong about this whole business. It'll all come out some time."

"And when it does, it may strike closer home to you than you think!" Kate had let her venom drip from her full lips; then she whisked into the bedroom again and left them staring.

Prime went away then, her heart torn, her nerves twitching. One moment she felt like wheeling about and going to this woman, who seemed always between her and happiness, and having it out with her; again she thought of her father, and that the woman after all was his wife and his natural protectress in his present condition. She was too just not to realize that her own aversion to Kate gave her no grounds for starting a fight for control of Bar Six. So far as the world knew she was a rebellious child, who had left her father's home voluntarily, after a severe quarrel. If her father had been dead she might have started a legal fight for the ranch, but he was alive and in the hands of her enemy; he was helpless, with his life hanging by a thread, that a scene might easily snap.

So Prime went home, riding in the saddle firmly, as long as she was watched, almost reeling from it when she got away from the big house and past the fork of the trail. She held on until she reached Circle Dot X. Here she gave the distracted Miss Bolton plenty of employment for several days. Miss Bolton was a good nurse, and Prime's illness gave Teresa an outlet for her energies. These had been dammed up during her past days of lonely inaction.

Jim came home to Circle Dot X in a few days, after he had done all that was possible to assist in overhauling the fugitives. He was surprised that Kate Frazer took the elopement of Vangie so easily, but set down her seeming indifference to her preoccupation over Ed's condition.

Frazer remained about the same. If he spoke or made any intelligible sign, none heard of it, for either Kate or Annuncio were at his side unweariedly.

The Stranglers had gone, riding off on the long trails, to attend to their errands of judgment or labor, and life at Bar Six settled down to something like a regular routine again, only with one difference. Brazos was relieved from regular duty under Jarvis Larrabee and was about the ranch house all the time; gradually he became the medium of communication between Mrs. Frazer and the hands. Larrabee was being superseded by inches, and only the thick head and steady loyalty of the homely puncher kept him from seeing what all the others saw quite soon—that Brazos was the real foreman of Bar Six. and Jarvis but the figurehead, left in place until he should be removed.

Apparently the two ranches were quiet again. The great ranch and the little one went about their accustomed toils and labors.

CHAPTER XXVIII

THE ROUND-UP PASSES

THE great yearly audit of the range land was under way. The round-up swung ever closer to Bar Six, and the work of the riders piled up. As the actual labor developed upon Bar Six and the outfits nearest, that were throwing in with Bar Six, Brazos found it expedient to let Jarvis Larrabee appear to the public as the foreman for the big ranch. Brazos was too shrewd not to realize that it would not do for him suddenly to appear as boss of the round-up, for there were men in other outfits who had grudges against him to settle, and Brazos desired no gun plays or friction just then. He wanted above all things to have that year's round-up pass over smoothly, that he might play for his big stakes later.

Kate Frazer agreed with this reasoning. Brazos remained about the ranch, in charge of the work close about the home base. He did it well, as he could do so many things well, when he was so minded. The idea, deftly spread about, that she needed the help of a strong man to lift Ed Frazer about on his bed of pain, gave Kate the excuse her brains told her she needed, to explain the constant presence of Brazos with her. Kate, Brazos, and Annuncio had the watching and care of the stricken cattle king, and, when Prime came, as she did less often, she found some or all of the trio present or within call.

Jarvis and the old Bar Six cow-punchers took the round-up plans and the partial effacement of Brazos from authority as good signs, and so all

went smoothly again with the hands. The chance to gossip with other outfits, the hard riding and the long hours took the minds of the men somewhat off the way things were going within doors at the big house. And so the weeks went by.

The round-up passed below Bar Six, leaving Bar Six with a clean range for that year. The hospitality of the big ranch, expressed in terms of chuck-wagon output and free dispensing of tobacco and drinks to all who took part, had never been more free.

"I know Ed would want to have it so," Kate told Jarvis Larrabee, who had spread the news to all and sundry that "th' missus, she wants all punchers made happy." This won for Kate good will, and many inquiries for Frazer's health were made by men who wanted to take home the latest news to distant points. It was the consensus of the outfits that "Ed's wife is making a plucky fight of it to hold Ed's stuff together."

From the Bar Six herds the cut for beefing had been good. Kate had instructed Jarvis to cull down closely. She wished for a big trail herd, as she had a chance to sell a lot, and must realize to get cash for improvements that Ed Frazer had talked over with her. She expected he would be well before it was time for driving herds north, she told Jarvis, and that loyal, thick-headed servant of Bar Six carried out his orders blindly. Kate had ridden out to where the outfit was holding the beef cut on Low Mesa, a clean, choice grazing ground, a little to the east of the big house, between it and Dead Hole. It was easy work. The chuck wagon could make it in without effort for plenty of good eatables, so the men could have a change from the usual monotony of the round-up fare, and Kate's policy dictated that they have a treat of

home-baked bread, or a big pudding or cakes to fill the puncher's always aching sweet tooth.

There had been several local thunderstorms during the round-up, and these, by a strange quirk of nature's forces, had expended their strength chiefly upon that mesa, where the beef cut was being held. It had brought up strong grass there, and that had suggested the expediency of holding the animals destined for sale there as long as the grazing held. The rain had filled some almost forgotten tanks among the twistings of a small creek bed, about the center of the mesa, and so conditions were ideal for holding the beeves for a considerable time.

A small emergency horse herd was held with the cattle, but the distance to the home base was so short that the hands could ride in and bunk overnight, if necessary. Policy dictated, however, that a strong watch be kept to guard against the stampedes, either from natural causes or the crafty machinations of rustlers.

The round-up having passed Bar Six, the big ranch having stood the scrutiny of public inspection as to its herd and methods, all would be quiet for months, unless something out of the usual run happened. Bar Six herd was under stamp of public approval. It had gone through the great audit of the year.

The hands from other outfits, throwing in with Bar Six, had been witnesses to the impartiality of the Bar Six cut, and so Bar Six, with all its neighbors, had received anew a public-opinion certificate of honest business, one of the intangible, but most valuable, results of the open-range round-up.

"We've worked this 'bout right, Kate," Brazos remarked to her, as they sat on the bench at the top end of the garden of the dead woman, while

the range-land moon swam in a golden haze up from the eastern rim of the world. The splash of the waters of the little fountain came to them lazily.

"Yes," said Kate, folding her hands in her lap, where they were covered at once by one of Brazo's big paws, "it is about time to work your Lost Cañon stuff and get it in with Bar Six beeves. The cut was big enough, so we can afford to put your stuff and ours together. We can clean up on a sale that will bring in a big amount of cash."

"Have you heard from Beard & Flynt yet?" asked Brazos, mentioning the name of the Omaha firm that Frazer had always done business with.

"Yes; prospects are good for prime fours and fives. They offer—what do you think?" There was a hint of tantalizing coquetry in tone and pose.

"What, Kate? Something that means big for we-uns?" he asked, as his arm stole about her waist.

"Yes, Brazos, they offer twenty dollars a head for all we've got!"

"And Bar Six regular stuff will climb to five thousand head, and my Lost Cañon stuff will make another two thousand, that will give us forty thousand on mine."

"Better than the two or three dollars a head that you would have had to take for them as plain Brazos, the rustler."

"Yes, Kate. I admit that you had a head on you when you got into this Bar Six nest. I was plumb jealous first, but th' way it's turned out——Shucks, Frazer's as good's dead, an' we're in th' saddle."

"An' if he ever comes to himself, I'll get it all. If he doesn't, I'll get my widow's share, threaten a lawsuit for more and get another big slice to

make peace. Oh, we won't leave Bar Six beggars, no matter what."

His strong arm tightened on the prize he had won in intrigue's lottery. "But we've got to win it all, Kate—all, or none!"

"How're yore plans for bringing down th' Lost Cañon herd shapin' up?"

"I got word from Trantor to-day that he had them movin' out o' the cañon, one at a time. It'll take a while to get them out over that secret trail."

"That breed rider bring it in?"

"Yes, an' I think we better get shut o' José. We'll need a rider that's ours soon, not one loyal to Frazer."

"And put that breed rider in here as mail carrier, an' t' run our errands?"

"Yes, Kate. We've played under cover long 'nuff."

"I think so, Brazos." She patted his big hand, that was holding her to him. "Time to strike now, free an' clear, for our own. When will Trantor have th' Lost Cañon stuff within reachin' distance?"

"In ten days, maybe less."

"No doubt about their coming through without being bothered?"

"Trust Trantor for that. They're all road-branded into Bar Six. That will turn aside most any criticism or talk, for Bar Six buys only what's right," he said, with a short, derisive laugh.

"Yes, Frazer's old-time reputation for honesty will cover a multitude of our sins," said Kate.

"Honesty is always best policy—for those who cash in on it, like we're doing," he replied, laughing heartily at that conceit of his. "Th' brand blottin' an' fixin' on that Lost Cañon herd o' mine has been well done. Their bein' hid up so long in th' cañon has let th' ha'r grow clean up to th' aidges o' those fixed brands, an' th' brand burns are all

healed. Once we get them cattle down here, an' on the trail with Bar Six stuff, we'll go through. Once they're sold an' turned on to th' long trails in charge of Beard & Flynt's drivin' outfit, an' we've got our money from Beard & Flynt, let th' ball roll."

His jaws snapped together with a click on that last word, and his face took on an ugly look. His hand caressed the butt of his six gun, and Kate could feel his whole body stiffen, as his nimble imagination leaped to the possibility of trouble, and his iron will outleaped that thought to the decision to shoot a way out of whatever corner chance might bring him into.

At noon next day José Almonté, humming a little song, obeyed a summons to attend at the big house, as the Señora Frazer wished to see him. The brown lad who bore the order smiled maliciously, as José betook himself to the portal, beside which the Señora Frazer so often sat while sewing, within call from the room where the Señor Frazer was on his bed of weakness.

José's hand went up in salute, then his wide hat, with its tinkling silver bells, came off, and he bowed gravely.

"Use me as it may please, señora," he said, with his usual courtesy. He expected an order to ride somewhere.

The woman snipped off correctly the thread and laid down the work carefully on the table at her side. Her eyes flashed up to engage the soft brown ones of the loyal light rider, who waited, puzzled at this unwonted blaze of anger toward him, who ever sought but to serve and oblige.

"Why did you take so much time riding to Tin Cow an' back yesterday?"

"Señora!" José was searching his memory for

the tale of the hours he had idled in the inn with Felicé, for it had not been an errand of haste, and he had taken a long siesta there.

"I've found yo're loafing in that *mescal* joint. I can't have my riders triflin' thataway." Her eyes were fairly ablaze now. "Begone!"

"Señora!" José's sky and earth seemed to reel. To begone! Not to be at Bar Six, where life flowed so easily, and his duty it was but to ride and ride and ride! His father had lived there; his father's father had served the Spanish grandee, who had had the big house in dimmer years long past. José was but a boy, once removed from peonhood, and Bar Six was his ancestral seat.

"Begone!" she flung the word of insult and dismissal at him anew.

The brown eyes flashed once, then the slim form straightened; the belled hat swung up and was clapped firmly onto the black curls that ornamented the small, well-shaped head. José's toes gripped the ground, and he spun about, walking stiffly, without a word of farewell, disregarding all cheerful greetings of the boys and the attempts of the other Mexicans to interest him in little errands, which they wished to have done, for they thought he went merely to ride at the behest of the señora.

José paused not until he had roped out his own horse and mounted, after having gathered his scanty belongings. He rode in silence down the trail, and at the forks, instead of going to Tin Cow, he made for Circle Dot X. José wanted above all things to see the Señor Jim, that big, just man, who understood José and his kind, and to whom they all looked up, even as they had looked up to and respected Ed Frazer in his time of dominance.

José found the Circle Dot X folk all at home. His face told Jim of trouble, as José, after swing-

ing down, gravely saluted them all. He stood, his hand on his right hip, his head held so that his chin was high, for the pride of his race was mounting.

Jim stepped to the lean brown man's side and laid his large hand kindly on José's shoulder.

"What is it, my friend?" he asked softly, while the women watched, sensing that something unusual was afoot.

A quiver passed over José, a quiver that set his belled hat a-tinkling. Prime smiled at him encouragingly.

"Señor Easton," he said, with slow, even utterance, "Ah'm askin' large favor from you, señor."

"What is it, José?"

"Ah'm ridin' for place. Ah'm wantin' letter of write."

"Yo're leavin' Bar Six?" Jim demanded.

"Si, señor."

"Why? Yo've been part of Bar Six——" Prime began.

"Si, señorita. My root, he is in dhat ground of Bar Seex. It hurt when dhat root, she breaks, but——" His gesture showed how deeply he felt his downfall from light rider of the great ranch to a man without a letter, a characterless man of the long trails.

Miss Bolton drew Jim aside and whispered a little. José, with the courtesy of his race, waited, for they were great folk, and he was small, and he must await their decisions. He had his reward when Jim left Miss Bolton and, after a word with Prime, spoke.

"José, throw your hoss into our corral, an' find a peg for yore saddle in beside mine. We want a hand. Thank Miss Bolton."

CHAPTER XXIX

THE WILD BUNCH

SAY, Pecos, what you reckon those animiles are that're comin' down t' be throwed in with our beefs?" Silent Tripp asked of his bunkie, as they sat for a moment together watching the Bar Six beef cut, that was being herded on Low Mesa. The cattle were stuffed with good feed from the unusual late rains forcing of the naturally rich grass up there. The two had met on their rounds and now began to swap comfortable talk for a moment.

"Silent, search me. I wish I knew. I thought we had plenty o' beef here. More than Ed Frazer ever sold at one whack." He threw one knee into a crook about his saddle horn, while he relaxed and prepared to roll a cigarette.

"Is that Jarve projectin' over this way?"

"Sure is, Silent."

They faced about, and Jarvis rode up on an easy lope. They were on the north side of the mesa, and the cattle in sight were spread out so that the shorthorn observer might have thought there were few head in the whole region. But send skilled men all through the dips and over the swells, up and down the open land and through the clumps of scrubby growth, that broke the mesa's surface up into little green parks, and a dozen here, a score there, would come into view, and in half an hour a thousand cattle would be in a bunch. Low Mesa could graze twice the cattle it now held. It was the big ranch's "jumping-off place" for fitting trail herds for beginning their

long marches toward the shipping chutes along the distant railroad. All the hands had to do was to watch the edges of the fat grazing district, to keep the beef cut in and other cattle out.

"That breed rider that took José's place, he came curvin' in just before I left home," Jarvis announced. "An' th' big news he had was that this herd that's coming will be here mighty quick. My orders are t' be out here t' watch for it an' make 'em feel homelike."

Jarvis spat spitefully, and they could see that he had more to say. Silent gave Pecos a glance of warning, and Pecos refrained from letting slip a sarcasm at Jarvis' expense. So they had their reward in his next remark.

"Who do you s'pose is givin' orders this bright mornin'?"

"Yo' say it; it might hurt my mouth," Pecos replied.

"It ain't never Brazos?" Silent could not refrain from asking.

Jarvis' honest face showed surprise and added chagrin. "How'd you guess? Yes, an' he acts like he was lord of all."

"I give you credit, Jarve; you got brains," said Silent, but his sarcasm was lost on Jarvis. "Don't you think so, Pecos?"

Pecos nodded. Poor, big-hearted Jarvis looked at each in turn, then his heavy pock-marked face was writhed into a bitter smile.

"Aw, boys, I'm the goat. Don't push th' prod no deeper."

"I'll bend a gun on any one that tries," Jarve," Silent declared.

"What's that, off north?" Pecos demanded.

Their practiced eyes began to study the low-lying cloud, which had made its appearance out

on the horizon, at the point where Pecos' lean finger pointed.

"That's them—comin' right now," Jarvis said. "I'm goin' up to meet them and show them where to throw off."

He rode away, and they watched him. After a moment they glanced about to make sure the territory under their observation held no threat against the peace of their own cattle. Then it was that they saw two riders approaching by the way that Jarvis had come.

"The missus an' Brazos," Pecos remarked. Silent nodded.

They watched the pair ride toward them—Kate Frazer the picture of the finished range woman, swaying easily, her form carrying not an ounce of surplus flesh, her chin held high, her warm-toned eyes clear, flashing, her small hands held low. Thunder's gait suited her, and the horse by now was entirely broken to her will. Brazos, on Comet, rode more heavily, yet well, for the man had lived all his life afork, and his strong legs gripped the steed he rode like the jaws of an iron vise.

Habit made the two range riders salute their employer, and Kate returned the salute absently, for she was studying the trail murk, which the approaching herd cast up. She spoke to Brazos in a low voice, and the man bent over to give her his ear, with a familiarity that made Pecos and Silent glance at each other meaningly. Kate, eying them aslant, noted their involuntary exchange of thought, and a covert sneer wreathed her full, red lips, as she continued her whispering to Brazos. He, on his part, straightened in the saddle and eyed the twain coldly. A veiled arrogance and sense of power seemed to make the man dilate and

grow in their sight. He turned half from them and showed contempt in the action.

"I guess we-all ain't so much, eh?" Silent flung the question at Pecos in a voice that the two could not fail to hear.

"No; we're just plain punchers. What a long tail our cat's got!"

Brazos half turned to them, as if to take up the gage, but a low word from Kate sent him scurrying away toward the dust cloud. Pecos and Silent were made to feel, without a word and by the way the woman edged Thunder away from them, that their room was desired more than their company. So they began to twitch their horses aside. They had not gone very far when they saw Larrabee returning, on a keen lope. He passed Brazos without stopping and came to where Kate sat. She motioned for him to remain close at hand, and she listened to what he had to say. Presently Jarvis came over to where the two were. Then they saw that his face was red beneath the dark tan.

"Whoopee, that's some wild bunch comin' in," he whispered to them.

"Men or cattle?" Silent asked.

"Both! By crimus, boys, who d'y' s'pose is ridin' point?"

"Who?" Pecos asked.

"Trant!"

"Him!"

"Somethin's goin' to pop!"

"An' I saw 'Malpais' Pete, 'Windy' Crashin, 'Bronk' Janthrope an' 'Cache' Gaul among th' riders. Malpais an' Cache are swingers now. I don't know how many men there is in that outfit, but there's more'n ever was needed to trail a herd of that size."

"What d'y' make o' it all?" Silent asked.

"Nawthin' good to Bar Six," Pecos declared.

"Hard-faced lot, boys, all of them. Two-gun men mostly, with their guns tied down s't they won't wobble. Sawed-off shotguns in saddle scabbards and a few rifles. By crimus! That outfit might fight th' world."

"What did Trantor say?" Silent asked.

"He jus' skinned those wolf teeth o' hisn an' allowed he was comin' home t' roost. Just that! I wanted t' tell he was a liar, but I s'pose the missus knows what she's doin', so I rode hard on my fool tongue an' got his word t' her."

"What was that?" Silent asked.

"Oh, jus' a report that th' herd was so-so, an' they'd throw off where I showed them an' wait. I su'pose Brazos," emphasizing that name, "will be th' host t' Trantor's lambs. Well, he fits!" Jarvis was hot with indignation.

"What are you men harpin' on over there?" Kate suddenly demanded. Her voice had a harsh, unpleasant dominance in it that jarred.

The three glanced rather guiltily at each other. It was Silent whose tongue wagged first.

"Who? Us? Why, ma'am, we was just making words run into conversationlike."

"I see no harm in that," Pecos put in.

Jarvis did not speak. The thick-headed veteran was mulling over many things just then: the slights put upon him, that he was only beginning to discern in their true light; the deposition of José, the uprooting of Big Jim from Bar Six soil, the ousting of Prime.

"You three may be ridin' chuck line this winter if you don't give me a civil tongue," the woman replied with added sarcasm.

"By crimus, we'd not be eatin' dirt——" So

far Jarvis got, then he bethought himself that he was talking to a woman—for all he knew a good woman. He put a tight crimp in his tongue.

Kate did not push her antagonism further. She gave her attention to the vicinity of the new herd. The three men saw now that a group of riders had left the haze, and they were coming toward them. Pecos, Silent, and Jarvis turned to haze back a bunch of steers that came in from the west, headed toward the Low Mesa's better grazing, and that gave them vent for their feelings. The driven cattle felt the sting of their anger, and the men, perhaps, were glad for this outlet for their rage against the woman, who was riding away after having cut them so deeply. For the threat of setting them out to look for places, with the winter coming on, was a mean affront. Had Kate Frazer been a man—well, no man could have thrown that in their faces, they were agreed, as they rode back to their post of observation.

When the riders rode up, Kate swung in with them. The party now was disclosed as a half score. Kate and Brazos rode ahead; Trantor was just behind, and following him came the others, their faces either scarred with wounds or scowls or physical defects. Not a few had sawed-off guns; all rode well. Their bridle chains were dulled; their clothing worn, gloves frayed, spurs cheap, but strong. Their belts and holsters were old, but each man's gun rode easily, and there was about them all an air of assurance that proved they would go through, singly or together. Each had a brand-new rope, newly furnished for present service! The three Bar Six men drew together, as the cavalcade came up to their positions. Kate Frazer held up her hand, and the newcomers halted. Kate beckoned to Trantor, and he came forward

with a show of eagerness. Jarvis edged back a little, and his slow hand dropped to the butt of his gun. The other two kept company with their foreman.

"Now look here, Larrabee," said Kate. "I've got Trantor on Bar Six to do a job of work. I don't want no biggoty gun plays. Hear that?"

Her voice was harsh, her manner plainly insulting.

"I hear yore words, ma'am, but I don't listen to yore voice," Jarvis replied. His hand did not leave the butt of his gun, and his eyes were on Trantor. There was a buzz in the ranks of the newcomers, but Trantor laughed it down.

"No fool gun play, boys. We're here to do a job o' work."

"There's th' line we're ridin'," Brazos announced, waving his hand and indicating how far the loose cattle and the beef cut could drift. "I'll ride along an' show you boys jus' what we want done. C'm on."

He swept them together with a gesture of easy authority. Trantor spoke to his men, and they cantered off. Kate remained and was plainly amused at the astonishment of Jarvis and his friends.

"I guess we-all are that old an' run down we can't ride for Bar Six no more," Silent declared at the woman's straight-held back.

"Took you mighty long to find it out," she replied over her shoulder, not deigning to give them the sight of her face, as she cast her insults back to them. "I had accounts figured up this morning. You three c'n ride for home. Pick up all th' other lunk-haids on yore way. You'll find Annuncio has money or checks for you-all waitin', and th' sooner you-all fade th' better."

Silent quirted his horse, and it dashed alongside

her. He grasped the reins of Thunder and leaned over to look into the face of the proud and triumphant woman. He drew back before the arrogance and hatred that he saw there.

"If you were a man," he said, "I'd break you. Yo're a woman—a demon woman. You kept it out o' yore face till now. But th' secret's out."

Her eyes blazed into his; her voice trembled with the force of her dislike.

"If I was a man, you'd not look me in th' eye, Silent. But I c'n shoot if I have to."

"Come away, Silent. You can't fight a woman, nohow," Jarvis called.

Silent tore himself away with an effort, for Jarvis had told the truth. He could not fight a woman.

The three wheeled their steeds and rode away. The light, evil laughter of the woman on the knoll pursued them.

As they rode on they began to pick up the other old Bar Six men, Bob Grant, Hennie Taylor, Tyson Alamos, and many another. Their faces told the hands that something tremendous had happened, and they summed it up in these words, as they met each puncher:

"We're takin' our time, boys. Ride!"

At the nearest point to the home base they found others of their crowd waiting, expectant, for it seemed that Kate Frazer had dropped a venomous word here and there on her ride out. As soon as she was sure of the support of Trantor's crowd she had thrown off all semblance of observing old-time conventions, and her wild nature, so long kept in leash by her cool ambition, had boiled over.

So the Bar Six men, who had not even seen the actual coming of Trantor and his crowd, had an inkling of what portended. Knowing that the southern-line riders would come in, when relieved

by Brazos and Trantor, they all rode for the big house, stormed up to the bunk house and began the task of getting their stuff together for departure. Many of them had been there for years, and all had looked forward to remaining. The problem of packing was a great one, for each had but one, or, perhaps, two private horses, and not much can be carried in a pack. A deepening rage filled their hearts, as they went about trying to sort out what they could take and what they must give up. It was Silent who solved their problem.

"Boys, I don't care what you-all say, I'm goin' to take all my stuff. We'll borrow two-three wagons an' tote all our plunder out to Miss Prime. She'll take care of it for us."

"I think old Molly Polly is coming now with th' chuck wagon," Pecos announced. "I heard them axles laughing, as they joggle 'long."

Presently they heard Molly Polly cursing, as only a cook can curse, when he is mad to the bone. He was driving slowly, and that was a sign that he was out of bounds as to temper. They descended upon him, as soon as he had drawn up before the bunk houses, and they found that he, too, had been told to get off Bar Six.

"We'll take th' chuck wagon an' th' big wagon we use f'r haulin' grub out from Tin Cow in th' spring," Jarvis decided. "Now, ever' man pile on his plunder, an' we'll strike for Circle Dot X. Miss Prime'll take care of our stuff till we send for it."

"I sure wish she was back here," Bob Grant said softly.

"Ever'body does that," Pecos remarked soberly, and they all felt what a calamity it had been to them to lose her.

"I wish old Jim Easton was back, too," Silent amended.

"Now you said a mouthful, son," Bob declared.

Under Larrabee's leadership they formed in line and walked up to the big house. Jarvis knocked at the door, that never before had been closed to them, and it was opened a niggardly inch. The brown, sharp nose of Annuncio stabbed the silence. She let drop an acidulous little laugh, as Jarvis told her what they wanted. She had the funds there. Soon Jarvis had checked off the amounts from his time book, which he always carried with him. Larger sums were paid partly in checks; the smaller ones and the odd balances in cash.

Matters were soon adjusted, for the men were too angry to wrangle over several little deficiencies, that were made apparent. In a few moments they were storming down to the wagons and then rode down the trail toward the Tin Cow fork. The wagons rumbled and bumbled over the uneven going; led horses whickered; horses under saddle seemed to catch the contagion of unusualness and began to buck. Mexican retainers came out to stare and jabber. Their faces fell, as their loved Americano friends went.

"Adios," they called.

"Adios," the punchers answered.

They rode in silence, so far as words went, but the wagons made their din, and several times ropes had to be passed from saddle horns to front axles or tongues of wagons, to give the tired teams a lift over the worst of it.

"Who is that ridin' out this way?" Jarvis asked of Silent, pointing far ahead on the trail.

"That looks like some one I know. Why, sure, it's th' Adequate Lady."

It was Teresa, out for a little ride alone. She saw them coming and drew up wonderingly. Pecos

called to her and rode up. His hat swept low, as he bowed over his saddle.

"This looks like an exodus, Mr. Honeyman," she exclaimed, her eyes twinkling.

"I don't rightly know him, ma'am, but th' sight of you is welcome entire." He gentled his horse alongside her own, and they shook hands.

"What does it all mean?" she asked, as the rather heated words of old Molly Polly, trying to put the fear of man into his team, drifted up the trail to them.

"Ma'am, we're departin' complete," he replied, setting his hat on precisely.

"Departing?" Her sunny eyes were wide with interest.

"Indeed, ma'am. It's like this."

In a torrent of words he told how they had their jobs cast into their teeth, and had been told to get off Bar Six. As he talked, Teresa's eyes flashed open, and her lips moved.

"We've come to see if Miss Prime won't pack our stuff in some place, or let us make a cache. We've all got to ride for jobs. It's sure goin' to be a wrench when we break up. Some of us've been ridin' siders for yea's."

Pecos felt his throat contract, and he saw a tear trickle out of the corner of Teresa's eyes. She faced about in her saddle, and he saw a light of determination in her eyes.

"Mr. Pecos, forgive me for using your first name——"

"My frien's all do, ma'am."

"Mr. Pecos, I want to hire you-all—bag and baggage."

"Hire us! Lord love you, ma'am! You ain't got enough cattle on Circle Dot X to keep this bunch busy—not even onct a week befo'e breakfast."

"I know that, but we may have, some time."

"Bar Six has got you stopped on ever' side, ma'am. Circle Dot X has only lived because Bar Six didn't pinch too hard. I've seen lots o' little ranches go down when big cattle men gave th' word. Ed Frazer, he was square an' let Circle Dot X ramble. But now, with that demon woman—excuse me, ma'am, for sayin' such words."

"Thank you for saying them so crisply, Mr. Pecos. Now I'm going to lope for home to let Prime and Jim know you're coming. Tell the men to keep straight on. There's a welcome home for you and a fighting chance."

She spoke with a snap of her firm jaw that warmed Pecos' heart.

"A fightin' chance! Tha's all we asks, ma'am."

She quirted the staid pony into galvanic action and soon was bobbing away at what she took to be a terrific lope, but Pecos, watching her go, did not grin. Instead, he spoke to the circumambient atmosphere these true words:

"By cat, she's some Adequate Lady, if she does ride like a meal sack on an off oxen's nigh hurricane neck."

CHAPTER XXX

HIS HARDEST TRAIL

WHAT do you make o' this?" Brazos Kingston flicked a bit of paper across the table to Kate Frazer. He had just came up the path from the bunk houses and found her seated under the big house's gallery, within call of any one inside. Annuncio was taking a few hours off from her vigil in the room where Ed Frazer was helpless. A minor servant was with Ed.

Kate examined the paper critically, her eyes glinting with anger, as she scanned the lines.

Here's the wagons we borrowed, with fair rent for two days' use. We're here to stay, and we aim to displease.

The Real Bar Six Bunch,
per our real foreman,

JIM EASTON.

"Where did you find this?" she demanded.

"Pinned to the seat of the big wagon that they took to drag their plunder away. It was just below on the trail this morning."

"Find where they are hangin' out? Over in Tin Cow?"

"No, they went t' Circle Dot X, entire."

"The whole bunch?" she asked, showing her astonishment.

"Yes," replied Brazos shortly.

"Oh, well," she replied, with her palms upward and hands out-flung, "let them come on. Brazos, I feel able to meet any opposition now. I've gone so far that I'm goin' clear through, no matter what."

Over at Circle Dot X that morning there was considerable activity. The ex-Bar Six men had swarmed all about the place upon their arrival. Room for their surplus stuff had been made in a small unused outbuilding, formerly devoted to storage for grain. Prime and Jim were electrified by the news Jarvis and his men brought. Miss Bolton brushed aside all their misgivings about paying such a crowd of hands.

"I feel," she said, "that there is something going on at Bar Six that we know nothing about. *That woman*," emphasis on those words strong and aggressive, "never brought that gang of cutthroats over in this country just to look at."

The men spread their "tarps" in likely places about the place, or curled up in the buildings, wherever they were best suited. In the morning Teresa ordered Jarvis to take the light wagon to Tin Cow and rustle a tent. With a half dozen men to rope the wagon along over the roughest going, by dragging it with ropes from their saddle horns, the trip was made quickly.

Before night a tent, which a party of Eastern hunters had abandoned, was purchased for a small sum and transported back to Circle Dot X. Then the wagons were sent back to Bar Six by moonlight and left where Brazos had found them. So now, with Molly Polly to cook, a roomy tent for the men to sleep in, and with plenty of provisions, Circle Dot X faced the future hopefully, even though, as Silent expressed it, "There was a man and a half and a hoss and a half to every cow and a half on th' blessed ranch."

After a good night's sleep in their tent and a good breakfast, the bunch were feeling like "runnin' on th' rope," according to Peco's idea of it. Jim Easton was beginning to tug at his hair in the effort to

think up some means of keeping them busy, or at least making a pretense of it, when Teresa appeared, dressed for the trail, and solved his problems by saying:

"I think we ought to ride up to Low Mesa and see for ourselves what those cattle are. You men are well informed on brands, and you may learn, from the gossip picked up during this last round-up, what has happened in these parts. We may get something that will be of value in the fight that is coming."

"How do you know there's to be a fight?" Prime asked, coming up in time to hear the last sentence.

"I don't know, but I feel it." Then she said to José: "I'm going to ride, José. Saddle my horse."

"The Adequate Lady has sure stated some words," Bob Grant remarked. "We've been guessin' an' gossipin', but what we want are a few facts."

"We'll go get 'em," Jim declared, swinging toward the corral. In a few moments the swish of ropes, the snorting of horses trying to dodge loops, the swirl of dust, told of saddling time, and not long afterward the whole outfit streamed off up the Dead Hole trail, accommodating their pace to the rather rollicking amble of Teresa's guaranteed mount.

Along the rocky rim of Dead Hole, their horses' hoofs rang out, as echoes started from the shelving recesses, over which the top strata projected. They reined in there for a brief rest. Jim, swinging over from his saddle, got a handful of stones and began to cast them, one by one, into the abyss. There was no sound until each hit the bottom.

"Th' rock cuts away sharply under th' lip o' th' cliff, beneath our feet, here," he said to Teresa. "I've been down in th' Hole, comin' in from th' other side, an' looked up. This place we are on

now is all hollow under us, the whole thing is like a big shelf."

"Suppose it were to drop off?" she asked, with a shudder.

"Oh, I guess it'll stay a while," Prime replied. "It's been here since Adam was a child, you know."

"Above there, where that bank of boulders is along the aidege, like some giant had laid a wall there to keep folks from fallin' over, the shelf is thinner yet," Silent informed them. "I was down in th' Hole last year on a prospectin' jaunt. By th' Rio Grande River, but there's a place up along there where it seems from b'low that that aidege rock is too thin for comfort. But we never notice it ridin' along up here."

"Mighty mean place, if we ever get a stampede headed this way off Low Mesa," Jim remarked.

"Aw, we won't ever; we got nothin' to do with Bar Six no more," Bob Grant replied.

They rode past "the giant's stone wall," as Teresa called it now. At the lower end of the wall the big stones were twisted out of line, making a winglike projection into the trail, around which they had to ride. Seen from above this projection looked as if the builders of the giant's wall had started to lay their rocks at a tangent from the rim of the Hole, but had given it up and left their material to litter the ground. For a hundred yards this wall was along the edge of the Hole, as if some careful township officials had put up a majestic guard rail to keep travelers from falling into the Hole. Then it ceased, and a person, riding along from the west off the level stretch that reached away to the left of Low Mesa, might well ride into the Hole in the dusk before being aware that such a death trap existed.

Leaving Dead Hole at their back they swung west

now. A short canter brought them to the eastern lift of Low Mesa, and they found a cattle trail up to the level of the grazing herd. Here and there, where the mesa dropped away to the level leading to Dead Hole, there were easy grades, down which cattle might come a hundred abreast without danger. Up one such place the cavalcade rode, and then the ride toward the place, where the first lot of cattle were to be seen, was begun. They rode slowly, for Jim wanted all the men to read the brands on the strange herd, and to make any other observations of value.

Now and again they jumped little bunches of real Bar Six stock, with their clear, clean brands, and many of them were animals that this or that man knew. Some incident of roping, or branding, or driving had fixed its marks on his memory. The cattle were filling out well on the good grazing and plentiful water of the creek, that cut the low mesa in two.

For a time they saw no one. It was Bob Grant who saw and hazed out into the open the first lot of strange cattle. The outfit examined them as they passed—wild looking, but heavy, stock, all gaunted from their recent long and hurried drive. They were cropping the grass eagerly, even as they were forced gently along. Every little while they would lift their heads and snuff angrily, gallop a ways, then feed again.

"A mighty mean-lookin' bunch o' hard-boiled animals," Pecos declared.

"About fit th' bunch that herds 'em," Jarvis added.

They had been so intent upon the cattle that they had not observed the approach of riders from the north. They came swirling up, two of them. They were mounted on rough, but strong, cayuses, and they were heavily bearded. Their sombreros were

tattered as to brim, and their chaps were torn, for they had to wear leg armor, since there were many patches of cat-claw and mean mesquite in certain low sinks on the mesa.

"Them cattle suit you?" the larger of the two demanded, as soon as he had brought his horse to a slithering halt.

"Why, no," Jim spoke up. "They ain't nohow as good-looking as you two. I'd like to alter both a whole lot."

"You may get a chanct," the other one flung at them, "later."

Silent crowded forward, but Jim spoke a quick word that held him back. Prime cut the cord of uncertainty.

"Where's your foreman?"

"A right smart piece up there," the man replied, sweeping his gauntleted hand toward the north.

"We'll ride, then," Jim replied.

As they swung north, the two turned in behind them and rode for a time in silence. Then they suddenly urged their mounts to a full lope and flashed by the party, their rough nags displaying surprising speed. With knitted brow, Jim watched them go, but he restrained several tentative indications that his men displayed to ride after the two and start a row. They had little to say as they rode, for every one sensed that something out of the usual run impended. Here and there they jumped more of the strange cattle, and over each the range-wise riders cast their eyes keenly.

"They'll have their chuck wagon about th' head o' th' creek," Prime said to Jim. He nodded.

They saw the little stretch of timber, where the springs of the creek were, and they made for it in due time. A column of smoke told of the cook fire

there. As they came on they saw another group riding toward it from the west.

"That's that woman," Teresa said, making her quirt whistle so angrily that her horse began to swerve. She did not strike her steady horse, and soon she ceased to cut the air.

"Yes, it is that woman and Brazos Kingston," Jim replied.

"We seem apt to have a show-down," Jarvis remarked.

"I'd like one," Silent said sharply.

"Now, boys, don't start anything. If they start, finish it," Prime replied.

"That's good advice, Little Augur," Jim declared.

The two groups of riders swept up to the camp at about the same moment. Brazos, at a word from Kate, edged Comet over toward the Circle Dot X crowd. His head was held high, and the light in his eye told of self-assurance.

"What do you-all want?" he demanded sharply.

Jim spurred Brilar forward and reined in beside Brazos. He leaned over until his face was close to that of the other.

"We ain't heard this mesa belongs to you."

"It's Bar Six range," truculently answered Brazos.

"But Bar Six never had a title to it. It's public range that Bar Six has used, mostly because it's close to Bar Six. Got any news later than that?"

Brazos' eyes fell. He knew the deadly accuracy of Jim's guns, the speed of his draw.

"Oh," he replied, with a little laugh, "seein' as you've come with an army, why, we'll let her ride."

He twitched Comet about easily, walking the horse back toward his party. Kate Frazer touched Thunder lightly, and he bounded toward Prime, who was a bit to one side. As she came on, Jim, Teresa, and the others nudged their horses, so that they

were grouped behind Prime, as Kate threw Thunder back on his haunches, with a cruel yank of the bit into his tender mouth. She was smiling with a willfully nasty lift of the corners of her full-lipped mouth, as she noted how Prime winced at the pain Thunder showed at the grind of the bit. She raised her hand in signal, and Brazos and Trantor and all the others came, with a swirling rush, to back her up. Jim passed the word for steady endurance to his forces.

For a full minute Prime eyed her foe disdainfully. Kate was compelled to break the tense silence. "What are you doing at my camp?"

"I thought it was my father's camp, although I think he wouldn't be proud of the outfit you've gathered in the room of better men," Prime replied.

There was a low, rumbling growl from the wild bunch, a murmur of applause from Prime's people. Jim's right hand went toward the bridle of Teresa's horse, as she showed a disposition to work him forward, but Teresa saw his intent and got the staid cayuse at the side of Prime's mount, with an intentness of purpose and skill that surprised Jim.

"What you have to say, say also to me; I am Miss Frazer's partner," Teresa cut in firmly.

"By the Rio Grande River, but listen to the Adequate Lady," Pecos whispered to Silent, whose hand was itching for his gun's grip.

"Why, you Eastern nobody, that they're usin' for a bank, what do you know 'bout cattle?"

"I know enough to know that you've turned a big herd of rustled steers and cows onto this mesa within the past two days," Teresa replied, jumping all hurdles of surmise in her anger.

The shot told, for Kate's face went white; Brazos started in his saddle, and Trantor snarled something. A hum, as of a hive of angry bees, went through

the ranks of the wild bunch. The men behind Prime were silent.

"Get off our range," Kate retorted, leaning toward Prime threateningly.

"This is any one's range here. You know it; don't say what you can't back up." Prime spoke in a mild voice, yet she did not draw back an inch before the fury of the supplanter.

"Well, have it so, then," said Kate, as Brazos whispered a caution from behind, reminding her of how they should avoid a fight until after the beeves were sold. "But we're doin' an honest business on Bar Six, and I want that woman's tongue laid off me."

"We've ridden through some of your strange cattle," Prime retorted, speaking evenly. "We've seen blotched brands, steamed and doctored brands. We think, if some of those strangers were roped down, good eyes could trace out how the burns of old brands have been stretched and twisted with new burns of the past year, putting them over into foreign brands that mean nothing down this way, but might, if we could get word of them up north, where the rustlers worked so hard last year—— I see you don't like to hear that."

"No, and I won't."

"You are hearing it. Listen, we aren't starting anything now, but we won't run. We're goin' to see your crowd over the ranges. If not now, after a time. You've got those strange cattle branded into Bar Six, using my father's good name to cover up some crooked deal. I've seen real Bar Six cattle to-day that never ought to have been sold; but, while you're in control an' my father down, you're skimming off th' cream of Bar Six. Well, skim it—it may sour on you. Does Pete Brennan know all this?"

"We're partners," Teresa said, "Miss Prime and I. What she says, I back."

"Come away, Kate," Brazos said, under the stress of the moment, using her first name.

"Yes, call her 'Kate.' Take her away—I don't know what she is to you," Prime replied. But Brazos spoke again, and Kate, her face blazing with hurt pride and anger, obeyed and retired behind the screen of her adherents. Brazos spoke again, and they all wheeled and rode closer in toward the tent and fire. Prime's people could see that Brazos was arguing with Kate, while she fumed at him, yet kept within the bounds of obedience to his will.

"I wish you hadn't spoken of Pete Brennan," Jim said to Prime.

"I wish I hadn't, too. None of us had mentioned him, as we looked those cattle over, but it popped into my mind to frighten her, and it came out before I thought."

"Boys, I want you-all to ride away quietly. I've got reasons for asking that," Jim said soberly. He set the example by turning his horse about, and Prime and Miss Bolton came with him. "Ride easily, as if we were all bound straight home. Keep together, and don't let any move they make draw any one out."

They all swung in behind Jim. As they glanced back, after dropping over the second slight swell, they saw a rider outlined against the sky line behind them.

"They've got an eagle eye on us," Silent said.

"I expected that," Jim replied. "That's why I want them to think we're homebound now, all of us. Ride quietly, as if we had nothin' on our minds but gettin' away without a scrap."

As each swell was passed, the watcher on the sky line appeared on the rise behind them. They

cantered steadily, came off Low Mesa to the level leading to the edge of Dead Hole, and then went south and home. Only after they had left Dead Hole did they fail to see the watcher behind them.

Once home they were called into a general council by Jim, Prime, and Teresa, and the whole situation was discussed.

"We've got to have a show-down," Jim declared. "That strange herd has got to be inspected. If it is sold off Bar Six, disgrace will be on th' old ranch forever, even if Ed is on his back. I'm goin' to send a man through to Brennan. Whoever rides will have to skin along Dead Hole and get through their lines above. They'll be riding close to block us off. A man that goes east of Dead Hole will get into the swamp there an' lose days—maybe not get out easy. I've got to send a man. We can all go an' smash a way through, but we don't know if we're justified in fightin' yet."

He began to cast his eye about. The men spoke, one after another, to claim the honor. A soft voice stilled their eager proffers. José stood very erect, his belled hat off, bowing:

"Ah'm dhe man to reed for Señoritas Frazeer and Bolton. José is ready. Ah'm makin' claim to mah rights of offeece, Señor Jeem."

"Yes, José is the best light rider on th' ranges," Jim replied. "I'll give him th' word to carry. Take yore own hoss, José; his smoke color is what's wanted for this night ride."

"Dhat word, he shall go through," said José, as he went to make ready his horse for the effort. He took off the jingling, silvered bridle's chains and substituted an Indian twitch rope to the jaw. He discarded spurs, rode with a pad of skins for a saddle, that there might be no telltale creak of saddle leather or tinkle of rowel. The belled hat he cast

down. At dark he rode, uptrail, and then all was silent, as they strained their ears for the last faint sounds of his going. Like a shadow the night had swallowed him.

"I'm goin' over to Bar Six on my own hook," Jim said quietly. "I've got an idea I want to work out."

José did not ride at top speed at the first, but warily. That the trail would be guarded he well knew; that some one would get word to the wild bunch that he was coming, was almost a certainty; for, among that crowd of outlaws and killers, there would be men wise in all tricks of trail and pursuit. The very drumming of the horse's hoofs would advertise his coming, tread he never so softly; for the great drum, which we call the earth, is sensitive and, to the ear laid close to its side, gives forth to the trained hearing vibrations from afar. All José asked was a chance; all that he sought was to find a hole through which to slip with stealth, or ride through with iron will and fiery splashes of lethal gun fire, as spurs to his purpose to serve well those he loved.

So, smoky hoss, step as lightly as may be, north, ever north. Not on the dim trail, but off to the side, for there may be a hole through. Now, smoky hoss, easy! What shows as a darker blur against the group of organ cactus to the left? It begins to take form—begins to move. José lies over, Indianlike, along the side of his steed, and now the shadowy horse seems riderless.

José gentled the smoky horse to the right, easily, softly, as if he felt no alarm. Peeping around the neck of his mount, José saw that the watcher was approaching, and he doubted not that his gun was ready. José might not shoot, for that would warn the main group of his foes. One hand on the mane, one toe hooked into the pad of skins, held José up,

and to the eyes of the watcher the horse was but a wandering stray, perchance.

The approaching rider spoke softly to smoky hoss, and José whispered a soothing phrase in his ear. Smoky hoss slowed at that word, and the rider, thinking the stray had heeded his voice, edged his mount closer and closer. The deceptive light and the shadowy stray horse's vagueness aided José's purpose. He dropped off on the side and was concealed by the slow-moving form of his mount, as the animal slowed down.

"Whoa, you shadow hoss! You'd make a good one for a man to use on the scout," a heavy voice drawled, as the rider reached, bending in his saddle, to touch the mane of the supposed stray. Smoky hoss shied and snorted.

The rider was clearly puzzled. The twitch rope was in José's hand, and it had not been seen in the gloom. The saddle pad probably had been seen. The stray horse was shy, then. A mystery horse! A cast of the rope might decide it, or might not, for one cannot throw a loop in the dark with certainty.

The rider came alongside again. José heard the swish of the rope. Smoky hoss heard it, too, and like a wise pony ducked. The rider knew he had missed and began to retrieve his rope. His horse was keeping pace with the stray that oddly did not try to run, although the rope had swirled about his ears once. The rope, coming in easily, caught and held.

"Loop's round some stone or root," the rider mumbled, as he leaned over to give it a rolling throw that would send a loop down it to make it leap free. Curiously enough the stray had stopped now, about where the end of the rope might catch the earth, or rock, or root of dead mesquite. The rider

leaned far over and slatted the rope again and again. José's hand, on the loop, tightened. His heels dug into the soil; he surged on the rope, catching the cursing rider, who had the slack of it wrapped about his hand, off balance.

The rider, taken unawares, toppled from the saddle heavily. His horse, snorting, ran wild.

The thrown rider, with constellations wheeling about his head, with fiery serpents darting before his vision, saw the smoky horse, so dim and purposeless, take unto himself a rider, who said: "Vamose!"

Then the stray began to move, and the thrown man, unable to arise, drove his hand to his holster, and, flash on flash, crash on crash, the six-gun spoke, and the bullets whined after the rider and the shadow horse.

But José, who knew that he had passed the watcher of the trails, never paused. It now remained for him to find a hole through the aroused forces, opposed to his going through. The watcher, at least, could not get between him and the wild bunch, giving them warning of his probable course. José had won the first point, and he could choose his own point of approach and trust to his horsemanship and skill on the long trails to win through!

Choosing the bold course José rode hard for the Dead Hole trail. Once he yelled; once he fired his gun. Where the giant's wall ran along the perilous edge of the Hole, José began to call ahead, uttering phrases without meaning, yet as if he were giving warning of the approach of a rider from Circle Dot X. Dark forms appeared, lining the trail, showing that the wild bunch was on the alert. José was among them, almost through, before they realized that he was not their own outpost.

The smoky horse never faltered, and the lean, brave rider stretched himself along the animal's

neck, while the guns flashed and his enemies wheeled their heavier mounts into the trail and tried to overtake him. Once the smoky horse bounded, as the sting of lead smote his gray flank; once José felt the rip of a ball across his own thigh. But the pursuers were far behind now, futilely shooting, their guns' flames stabbing the night. José straightened up, with a laugh, as he glanced backward. Then, uprearing from the trail side, Comet, with Brazos on him, towered over the slight, quick smoky horse. Comet's great hoofs crashed down, seeking the spine of the smoky horse, that crouched to earth and slid under. Brazos' curses and bullets followed, and Comet sprang in pursuit, but lost time in gathering speed after his plunging about, following his futile effort to stamp down the pursued.

Now the trail was a brown-black ribbon underfoot; the low clouds seemed to travel with him, as José lifted and lifted again the horse that held the honor of Bar Six in his keeping. One by one the blown horses of the heavier riders gave out; Comet, under big Brazos, last of all. And ever the smoky horse, lean, enduring, ridden by the featherweight lad with the full red lips, laughing eyes, curly black hair, wrists of steel and hands of velvety softness, outran them, putting the miles behind him. Dog holes, little cut banks, the fetlock-deep sandy spots, that might cause a plunging fall and fatal roll—all such minor perils were left to chance, for José rode through with the word to Pete Brennan to come to Bar Six, with the range land's law forces, to meet the crisis that impended. His problem was this:

To get the distance of two days of fair riding into one night of speediest going; to telescope forty-eight hours into twelve, and yet keep alive, between his legs, the smoky horse until the end of that hardest of all his hard trails.

CHAPTER XXXI

JIM'S IDEA

IN pursuance of his idea Jim Easton took a steady-gaited horse from Circle Dot X, for he did not wish to risk Brilar on an expedition where craft, not speed, was demanded. At dark he mounted and let the staid horse drift down to where the trail forked to Tin Cow. Then he rode up close to Bar Six, until he came to a convenient clump of mesquite; here he dismounted and went on afoot. To the west he left the trail and approached the big house from its left side. The Mexican dogs knew Big Jim for a friend, and he knew every hole and crack of the walls, each little outbuilding's shape and possibilities for concealment.

Cautiously Jim stole to the window of the room where Ed Frazer was held, prisoner of weakness and pain. The shadows were black there; a puff of wind sent the curtain, like a white dove's wing, out to snap its fringe at him. That told him that the window was raised. For a long time Jim stood against the wall, listening. At first there was no sound from within; then Annuncio's slurring tongue slid slyly over the vocables of her mongrel speech, and Kate Frazer's voice took up the tale.

"You won't have to watch this way long, Annuncio."

"I'm tired of it," replied Annuncio in Spanish. "Make his sleeping medicine stronger."

"No, we don't need to, now. I've got his name to the paper I want. Is he asleep?"

"*Si, señora.* Then he was stronger to-day?"

"Yes; now go take yore rest."

Jim heard Annuncio go out; heard the stir of a chair. He drew back in time to escape discovery. Kate Frazer was leaning out of the window, her gaze straight ahead. Had she turned to either side she would have seen Jim. She remained there quite a while, breathing in the cool night air. Jim could hardly withhold his hands from reaching forth to clasp her neck and drag her forth from her den of evil works, but she was a woman!

At the sound of a feeble voice Kate drew in her head. Jim pushed forward again, and heard Kate talking. Half phrases came to him.

"No word from Prime—she don't care for you, no-how. Everything's goin' well. Beef round-up was good—I'm selling a few. Sign this power of attorney to give me th' full right t' sell——"

There was a rustle of paper, then silence.

Jim was about to leave when he heard the coming of a rider. The man dismounted below and then came above, walking quickly. Jim could not hear him as he entered, for the newcomer was on the far side of the house from Easton's station. In a moment he heard Annuncio announce: "Brazos."

"Send him right in," Kate said.

Presently Jim heard Brazos enter the room, heard Kate whisper to him, and then Brazos began to make some kind of a report to Frazer, a report entirely at variance with the facts. Yes, everything was going well. The hands were all well. Silent and Pecos and Bob Grant? Yes. No, they hadn't heard from Carl Trescott. Cattle doing fine? Yes, sir! Jim could tell by the labored queries, the direct answers, the way Kate cut in with promptings, that the helpless cattle king was being fed one of those daily catalogues of lies that kept him quiescent. Frazer had found a little use of his tongue, then; could hear. Jim listened to the net of falsehoods, which

the two wove about him. Then Brazos went out, and, after a time, Kate, calling Annuncio to watch at the bedside, went, too.

As they passed into the garden, the sound of their movements told Jim where to look for them. He melted into the night and, after a long and tedious period of soundless effort, came close to the seat where he and Prime so often had sat, listening to the splash of the dead woman's fountain.

The brainy, handsome man and the fearless, scheming woman were there together. Jim heard his heavier voice report to her the riding through of the man from Circle Dot X toward the north.

"A slim, light-ridin' devil," he finished.

"That would be José! I don't like that, Brazos."

"Nor I. Some o' th' boys may get him."

"If they don't, we've a big chance yet. In th' mail at Tin Cow to-day was a letter from Beard & Flynt."

"What's in it?" demanded Brazos.

"They'll be in to-morrow."

"It'll take a day for even José to ride to Brennan's—till near sundown to-morrow, anyway. Well, it'll take time for old Pete to get a move, a day to come. We got plenty time to get those beeves off'n our hands, and get Beard & Flynt's check cashed."

"And I've got full power of attorney to run Bar Six as I please."

"Kate," declared Brazos, "yo're a wonder! I'm plumb 'mazed at you at times."

"And, better still——"

"Better?"

"Yes, he was stronger to-day. I got him to sign a draft of a new will, giving me all. It's just a scrap, three lines o' writin', but it clinches it all."

"Then——"

"No; we may need Ed Frazer alive more than daid. Wait!"

While they began to whisper, Jim, white-hot rage eating at his heart's core, fingered his gun's butt.

To shoot Brazos, to seize this heartless woman! It seemed at first the thing to do, but to what avail? She would deny; he had no witness to back him up. Brazos was, in the eyes of the world, the accredited foreman of Bar Six, and he, Jim, but a skulker in the darkness. Jim felt that Prime must be consulted, and Brennan taken into their confidence. While he was thus debating, he heard riders coming in and calling for Brazos. The two got up, and Jim did not feel he should start trouble then, for they were many, and he was afoot, sure to be found if they were once alarmed. He did not fear on his own account, but he wanted to get the facts, which he had learned, before Prime and the others. He felt no fear for Frazer's safety, as they needed him, Kate had said. Jim crept soundlessly away from the seat, fetched a wide circuit to the west of the big house, and won down to the trail below. He found the staid horse and forked him, riding for Circle Dot X.

Five days after Carl and Vangie had fled, the Reverend Eliphaz Morgan jogged the trail to Hartman, one hundred and twenty miles north of Bar Six. A very ragged, tired lad and girl came from the trail and, after much stammering, asked to be married. The Reverend Morgan, with his deep insight into frontier human nature, gave them their wish. Vangie offered to pay, for Carl was without money, but the good man refused her fee. Perhaps he believed their queer story of how they came to be afoot, so far from any ranch. He blessed them and went on.

The two went back to their furtive camp in a near-by cave.

Of how Carl and Vangie had suffered there is no need to tell. When she had been compelled to lie down, her feet cut on sharp rocks, that shredded their shoes, after their horse had died under them. When his heart had failed, she, with a true Western girl's courage, had goaded him into farther flight. Upheld by their faith in each other, they had come so far. Now they could go farther, wedded, happier than they had been.

"Lost Cañon, that I always heard Brazos an' Trantor talk of, ought to be up this way," Carl said to Vangie. "Trantor, he won't have heard of my being in trouble yet. He may let me have horses. I'll steal two if I have to, and I'll send him the money later. We're going easy now, for a while. I got some shells left. We can shoot and snare game. It will be hard enough, but we're both young an' c'n stand some grief, with happiness on th' road."

Vangie blew a kiss across the fire to him. Her heart was light now. After all her girlish years of flirting and self-seeking she had found what she wanted, the heart of the real man wrapped up in the body of this handsome, slim, strong boy. She had cared for him at Bar Six—yes, a little. But, when she saw the Strangers' noose, as she thought, closing in on him; when she saw him so helpless, thronged about by big men determined, as she thought, to slay him, the mother, that is at the core of every girl's heart, reached out for him. She could not let him die, so young, so full of throbbing life. And so she had plucked him, with her range girl's resourcefulness, out of their grip, and, on the long, terrible march to the north, she had learned really to love Carl. And now she could show her love in security and faith. A little flame shot out

of the heart of the fire to illumine her pensively sweet face, now lined with fatigue and travel-stained. Carl reached across to take her face in his palms.

"Oh, Vangie, girl, how full my heart is! Yo're a sider a man can be sure of. All my love's for you, li'l' one."

They had time now, in that lonesome land, to make crude sandals for their torn feet, by binding rabbit skins about them with the hand-twisted twine they made from the *maguey's* fibers, and with it, thorns serving for needles, they sewed the rents in their garments. In a few days they were strong again; their feet had healed. Then they began to search for Lost Cañon, using Split Face Mountain to the north as their guide; for that was the mountain which Brazos and Trantor had mentioned in their talks when they thought Carl was asleep. Their hearts were brave, but they were really forlorn figures, as they tramped through the wilderness of *mottes*, little hills, box cañons, cut-bank slashes across levels, or across little bits of bad country, where desert growths and woods growths wrestled, root by root and branch by branch, for what moisture and sunlight was to be had.

One day they were on a ledge over a stretch of flat land. Presently, far to the right, they saw a dust column that told of cattle on the move. They had seen few range cattle, and those only in brands unfamiliar to them, but they had observed many wild cattle, with long, dark horns, that ran to needle points, and rolling, red-rimmed eyes. Often these had challenged them stubbornly, and, being afoot, they had had many narrow escapes and been compelled to use their guns, diminishing their cartridges. Always, when compelled to kill a beef in self-defense, they had enjoyed a feast of the choice bits,

but had had to leave the rest for the buzzards and wolves, and move on. They were well fed now and healthy, brimming with the hope of youth.

Directly they saw the marching cattle, close held, shrewdly driven. That it would be hard to get a herd through the region Carl knew. He made Vangie lie close with him behind a boulder, and they watched the cattle and their herders file below them. The wild-looking men that drove them, the wilder cattle that made up part of the drag and attempted to break back, now and again, as if to a range they knew was only a little way to the rear, told the story to Carl: He whispered to Vangie:

"That's Trantor ridin' point, there! I see Malpais Pete an' Windy Crashin on swing—I can't make out no more at this distance."

"What does it all mean?" she asked.

"I don't rightly know, Vangie. If Trant was alone, I'd go an' brace him for help. But some of those men with him may've heard of my case. No tellin' where he raked them up. But those cattle came from some place where there's a ranch an' hosses to be had. We'll backtrack on them to-morrow. I wouldn't want to bring you down among them wolves of Trant's—no, not none!" His brows knit, and his mouth was firmly set.

Pappy Yeagers, sitting on the rim of Lost Cañon, brooded. He had been left alone, while the outlaw herd had been made up and taken out the secret way, leading from the seemingly inaccessible green vale, inclosed within the high cliffs. Lost Cañon was cleaned of good stock; only Pappy Yeagers was left to look after things. A bit childish, this shrewd old mind had ferreted out the twists and turns in Trantor's shifty stories, and he knew what Lost Cañon was, a nest of hunted men. But Pappy Yeagers, weak-willed, slack in muscle and con-

science, cared not. He ate well, waited on the wild bunch, and was happy in his easy, moralless way. But they had left him alone, and he had grown tired of the loneliness of the cañon; he yearned for an opportunity to talk to people, instead of to horses, weakling cattle, and cliff walls, that had eerie echoes.

A rattle of loose stuff behind him and the rush of a lithe body alarmed Pappy Yeagers; then he began to speak.

"Well, if it ain't Carl—an' Vangie, girl! Did you come back to Trantor, Carl? You did? Well, well, I'm glad to see a person with ears to talk into. How d'ye come t' be t'gether clear up he'e?"

"We want to go down into th' cañon," Carl answered, as naturally as possible. "Vangie an' I are married. We ran away to be married, Pap. Show us th' way into th' cañon."

Pappy glanced at him askance. "Oh, don't you know th' way in?"

"Shucks, Pappy Yeagers, you show us. I don't b'lieve you know," Vangie said. Pappy grinned childishly, as she wheedled him into compliance. He held off for a time, but at last he took them down the narrow, often dangerous trail. Below they found the collection of log shacks and the corrals.

"I'll bake you some sour-dough bread," Vangie declared, when he had shown them about, descanting all the while upon the great power of Brazos and Trantor. The dough bowl was far gone, but Vangie rescued the remnants and began her task. Pappy's tongue flowed on and on.

The boys, he said, had taken out their cattle to sell them. Oh, they were honest cattle—just so-so. No harm in having cattle, was there? Well, they had gone to sell their beeves. They hadn't had many hands, but one day a big outfit came down the

trail, and Trantor put them to work. Wild bunch? Oh, yes, they were right-smart wild, boy. You betty! Strong on the shoot? You betty! They used old Pappy Yeagers well, though. Let him have Trantor's own cabin, while they were gone.

Did they want to go in and sit down a while in the cabin? Yes, they did. Pappy, walking in advance, let his tongue ramble. The two followed him in. Vangie began to poke about to see what it offered in the way of housekeeping facilities. What was in the boxes, that had been made into wall cupboards? Carl listened patiently to the old man. He heard Vangie give a little cry of surprise, but Pappy did not hear. Then she put something into the bosom of her worn and tattered dress. Carl dissembled until he had worked the old man outside. At the first opportunity Vangie showed Carl what she found in the cabin, a false beard, black, crisply curling.

"That's th' beard th' man wore that tied me up an' took me down below South Springs, to where you found me, on th' day Frazer was shot," she told him. "Now I know who he reminded me of, an' why he didn't hardly say a word. He was 'fraid I'd know his voice. It was Trantor that killed Ed Frazer."

"Now we've got it, Vangie. Keep that beard," he said.

At once many things in her mother's behavior with Brazos began to appear clear to the girl, and she saw, with her man-wise eyes, beneath the veil of deceit, that her mother had been able before her flight to keep over the whole affair. They began to compare notes, as Pappy Yeagers dozed on a bunk inside, and the result was revealed to him when they departed during the night, each mounted, if lacking saddles. They had pads bound on to their horses, and luckily, among the rejected nags which the wild

bunch had left, they found two fairly slow-gaited horses that were not vicious. They had discovered some old shoes and whole overalls. In place of the tattered boy and girl, who had walked into Lost Cañon, out of it, before the dawn, rode two who seemed to be boys, for Vangie made a good-looking boy in her long overalls, turned up at the bottoms. Pappy, when he awakened, sought for them and, finding them not, might have believed he had dreamed of their coming, except that he found their discarded clothing. The whole series of events connected with their arrival and departure was a mystery to the old man ever after. In his growing childishness he was not sure but that he had imagined the whole affair.

One liberty they had taken in Lost Cañon, the renewal of their stock of ammunition from Trantor's cache, that Pappy Yeagers had shown them. Now, mounted, with some supplies from the outlaw stores tied in bags to their saddles, with their guns and some string and fishhooks, they could live well. If they were wet or cold at times, had to make slow time, they were young, and the days of joy and hope were theirs. For they felt, in their faith in themselves, that they had but to show that black beard to Pete Brennan, tell their suspicions, and be believed. So, keeping away from ranch houses and riders of all kinds, they shaped a course to the south again.

They came upon Harry Brennan, circling for strays, well north of C Diamond Tail. Harry reached for his gun when he saw Carl, but the boy's hands went up, and Vangie rode forward, calling:

"Don't shoot, you pretty Brennan boy! Don't you know yore manners when ladies call on you?"

Harry slipped the gun back into its holster and stared. Then he began to emit his rippling, care-

free laugh, bending far over the horn of his saddle in his mirth.

"Now tell me," he said, controlling himself at last. Carl, nettled at this reception, began to talk, and, as he talked, Harry's face became grave.

"If I was you two, I'd kept on goin'," he said at last. "You got a false beard an' a queer tale about what yo' suspect——"

"But I'm here, ready to face trial. I'm goin' in, not runnin'," Carl said hotly.

"You trifling Brennan child, let my husband alone!" Vangie was storming at him, clenching a browned fist under Harry's astonished nose.

"Yore hubby? Well, what next? Land o' dreams!" Again he doubled over his saddle horn; then he bethought himself. "Warm congratulations, I'm sure."

When he sobered down he rode in with them, going ahead to warn his father of what was coming. Old Pete met them and invited them in. Mother Brennan took Vangie into her rooms, and, when she emerged after half an hour, she was dressed as a girl. Quick work with scissors and needles, had turned one of Mrs. Brennan's old dresses into poor-fitting, but correct, clothes for the girl, who had told all her story on the ranch mother's warm bosom.

Carl, under Pete's severe grilling, did not break down. Thus Pete began to believe.

"I'm goin' down to Bar Six again," he said. "Harry, send riders out to gather in th' Strangers and their court. We ride to-morrow—early. We can take our time an' amble into Bar Six by way of Dead Hole an' look around, as if we're after some hoss thieves. Carl, yo' stay here, under guard of Mother Brennan. All I want is yore word."

Carl gave him the word and then went outside, where no one could see. For the first time in his life he sobbed. The girl, who had placed life and

honor in jeopardy for him, had been weighing upon his mind, and now it seemed that he could be to her something more than a hunted outlaw. Truly the boy was deeply thankful.

As the smoky horse, laboring and weary, but driven forward by the indomitable will of his swaying rider, swept on toward Brennan's in the morning, he was seen afar by Brennan and his men, and they waited across the trail to see what this wild rider might want. José, his eyes filming with weakness and pain, pulled his horse up, and, so weak and spent was the exhausted animal, that he had to spread his legs to stay upright. From the horse's quivering back José poured forth his story in torrential phrases, that held them spellbound. Then, his mission accomplished, he reeled from the saddle and would have fallen, but that Harry Brennan caught him and eased him gently down. His wound and that of the horse were hard to be borne, but neither would succumb to their hurts, Brennan quickly judged.

"Send a man back home with him," Pete ordered. "Now, men, roll yore tails and ramble. We got bus'ness at Bar Six this day, if so be we c'n make th' rifle."

CHAPTER XXXII

FORCING THE SHOW-DOWN

BEARD & FLYNT were known to the people on Bar Six, for one or the other of the big cattle buyers had visited the ranch when they were traveling through the range land. It was Beard who came this time, honest Eber Beard, lathy and taciturn, driver of hard bargains, but keeper of them, too, even if conditions changed and turned them to his disadvantage. He looked upon this visit to Bar Six as a mere pleasure jaunt. He would not have to scrutinize the beeves, for Ed Frazer's word was good. None of them would be misbranded or brand-blotted; if perchance another's cattle had wandered in, Frazer would render to the owners thereof an honest accounting. Dealing with a big ranch like that made business easy and profitable.

Eber Beard knew that Frazer was in bed from a wound, for the letters he had received from Frazer, letters written by Kate, had so informed him. But, as he was to do business with Frazer's wife, who held full powers to buy and sell for Bar Six, he had no misgivings.

Escorted by Brazos he rode from Tin Cow toward the big house. Beard was mildly curious about Big Jim Easton, as he sat easily in his saddle on the good horse which Brazos had had led out for him to ride.

"Easton, he's gone; had some run-in with Frazer before I came," Brazos said diplomatically. "Jim's a mighty fine fellow."

"I always thought so. I like to hear a man that

takes another man's place praise the other fellow, Mr. Kingston. Shows he's a good man himself."

"Oh, I don't know 'bout that! I don't set for a saint," replied Brazos, with just the right tone of self-depreciation to carry conviction.

"Mrs. Frazer, she manages well?"

"Her? Say, she was a cow woman before she saw Ed Frazer."

"Well, it's bad that Frazer is on his back, but he might be worse off than he is. He's lucky to have a wife that can ride herd on his outfit."

"You said a lot then, Mr. Beard."

So they jingled pleasantly past the fork of the trail and up to Bar Six. A Mexican lad took the Señor Beard's horse, and Brazos escorted the old cattle buyer up the little slope to the big house. Under the roof of the gallery Kate, a cool, competent figure, sewed a fine seam. A most home-like body was Kate that day, of all days.

"I suppose you'd like t' see Mr. Frazer? He is a little better now. I told him you were coming. If you'll keep in mind his condition, an' not say anything t' excite him, we'll go in. Mr. Kingston, have Mr. Beard's horse ready for him soon, so he c'n get out to Low Mesa to look over the cattle."

A few minutes later, Beard gazed down onto the white face of his old-time business friend. Kate spoke to Ed, and his eyes lightened. Beard bent over and took the cold, weak hand, and he was pained to find the man, who had seemed as a pillar of strength, brought so low. Kate bent over. Beard could see the livid lips of the man on the bed move, and then Kate relayed to Beard the invalid's greeting.

"He's glad to see you. Hopes you've had a good trip. He wants to whisper to you."

Grasping Frazer's hand Beard bent over, and Ed whispered to him:

"It's O. K. to deal with my wife. She's a good woman. I'll back her play, Eber. I'm better than I was. I can write a little now and whisper. I couldn't use my hand last week. She's got full powers to act for Bar Six."

Beard gave him such words of cheer as he could. Ed went on:

"We're selling good stuff this year. Kate wants money for improvements she's planned. She's bought in a mixed lot of outside cattle, all branded into Bar Six, all O. K."

Beard nodded and pressed Ed's hand. Kate, hardly able to hide the gleam of triumph in her eyes, stood at the window when Beard turned, as if she had not been on tiptoes behind him to listen to the whispering, and had not stolen away, as Beard dropped Ed's hand. Frazer had been coached; his will, that was weakened by pain, taking in the impressions the artful woman had given him. He had said just what she wanted to have said. "Now let them try to turn Eber Beard's mind from making the big deal!" Kate was thinking, as Beard stepped toward the door. She followed him out, after patting Frazer's pillow with solicitude. Under the gallery she spoke:

"I'll ride with you, Mr. Beard. You've seen me as the wife who had to be tender to her stricken husband. Now I've got to show th' other side, th' cow woman riding herd on a bunch of nervy men. You know we've got a new lot of hands. The old lot were stirred up by Easton after he was discharged, and they all quit in a bunch on me. Luckily round-up was over."

"Whew! I never thought Easton would get into that sort o' thing."

"Well, it makes a difference," she replied hesitatingly, as if embarrassed, "but I can tell you, as an

old friend, what's behind it all: Jim Easton was sweet on Ed's Prime. She quarreled with her dad over it, and then she took up my old ranch, that she'd bought on a whim, long before the quarrel. No sooner had she gone than Easton followed her there. They're living there—together—that's part of Ed's trouble." Kate was delighted with her final slash of malicious falsehood.

"I always thought Miss Prime was a good daughter to Ed. Well, well, you never can tell!" Wagging his head and sucking deeply at the good cigar, he exclaimed: "Missus Frazer, I'd never believed it, if you hadn't told me."

"But keep this all to yourself. Of course, when the old Bar Six outfit quit on me, I had to pick up hands in a hurry. You'll find some wild ones among them, but I had to take what I could in a hurry, as I had this deal on with you, and that outside cattle contracted for. Eventually we'll weed those bad men out of our outfit, but we've got to do the best we can now. You understand that?"

"Yes, I understand. And you're one plucky woman to fight it through," he replied admiringly.

"Oh, I don't know, a woman has got to do what she can. Let's start for Low Mesa now; we can eat out there. My Mexican housekeeper will look after Ed. Let me go give her some orders."

Presently Kate returned, dressed for the trail. She drew on her riding gloves, and they waited, while Brazos had the horses brought up. Kate leaped astride Thunder easily and called a challenge to the two for a lope, and they stormed out of the home grounds toward Low Mesa, with Beard completely at his ease. All signs pointed toward the good deal he was to make. Kate had played upon his pity, business judgment, and pride, in just the right way, and the man was now her own for the

purposes of the business at hand. Brazos, obedient to his instructions, rode to the rear, acting the part of the obliging, deferential foreman.

As they began to near the loose-herded cattle, the riders, whom they met, were most respectful to Kate and Brazos. Altogether Beard had the impression that he was riding with a woman of rare ability, who was fighting for her stricken husband's success, as best she could, amid a company of hard-bitten frontier wastrels, and who was holding them into line by sheer force of her vivid personality.

Beard noted with delight the fine condition of the Bar Six stock, that had been well primed by good grass before the round-up, and that had promptly put on weight on the good feeding on Low Mesa. The day was cool; a damp wind blew. The threat of rain had caused them all to take slickers, and the riders had tied them behind their saddles. Dust devils danced on the levels, as they rode, and often the cattle snorted and ran from them.

"These cattle are better than I thought, even for Bar Six," Beard said in honest praise.

"Bar Six is always better than its word," Kate replied.

"I know it is, and that's why it's a pleasure to deal here, year after year. Where are those cattle you folks bought in?"

"We'll run into them farther northeast," Brazos said, at a sign from Kate. "We drove them on to Low Mesa from that way, and we have kept them from drifting right among these. We wanted you to see them as they are, unmixed."

"That's the right way. Let's ride that way, then."

In time they came to the outland cattle. Beard noted the blotted brands and the strange brands, but he made no comment. They were all road-branded

into Bar Six, and that was his protection. If he took them, and a question was raised, he had Bar Six to levy upon. Brazos kept away; Kate was all smiles and had a ready explanation for everything he brought up.

"There'd been a drought up above Lost Cañon. Lot of small cattlemen up there sold out. Trantor bought some; Brazos bought some, before he came to work for us. Drought up there this year, too. Yes, I suppose some of those men up in the breaks may run nimble branding irons. Well, we've bought them fair and have good title. Bar Six is behind them all—those wild cattle no one can question. They were any one's that got an iron onto them. It was a plain speculation for Bar Six, buying them in. They're some gaunt, yes, but a month on our Low Mesa will fit them for a slow drive to where your trail herds will start from."

"We can't lose at the price; I'll take them," Beard decided.

If Kate's heart leaped with joy, her face gave no sign. It might have been just the sale of a few cattle to a passing driver for the cheap Indian trade, for all she let him see.

"Very well, Mr. Beard. We can go back now, or stay here for a little barbecue. Suit yourself."

Beard took out his watch and nodded.

"I think I'll go back to the big house. I can give you our check there. We can settle details on the way in. I can get back to Tin Cow and cut around by Willow Springs to Pete Brennan's, for my next buy. Beard & Flynt will put twenty herds up the trails, with the first grass, so I've got to keep moving."

"That will suit us," Kate said quietly, although her heart was knocking hard at her side, as she kept from her face the evidence of her inner

tempest of exultation. So they had won! Once the deal was made, the check passed—well, let come what would. She and Brazos would have a goodly stake, and, if Beard & Flynt had trouble afterward, why——

Brazos spoke to her warningly. She glanced up. Two men were riding toward them rapidly, Jim Easton and Pecos Honeyman.

“What’s that trouble maker want?” she demanded. Her pose of the good and much-harried ranch wife dropped for a moment, as anger blazed out. She thought she had made a mistake, but Beard’s words told her that even then she had erred on the right side.

“I don’t blame you for being riled at Easton, after what he did.”

Jim brought Brilar to a stop. Pecos, very erect and silent, waited. The others of the Bar Six bunch had been left at the edge of Dead Hole, as Jim had asked to go in alone and see Beard. He told them there would be no gun plays before Beard, as that would spoil the game for Kate and Brazos, whose best plan obviously it was to appear as law-abiding, tolerant big ranch folk, put upon by a hangdog bunch on a neighboring small ranch. In such a case Beard’s sympathy would be with the big ranch, as he did his buying almost entirely from big outfits.

“Mr. Beard,” said Jim, plunging straight at the heart of his errand, “are you buyin’ Bar Six stuff?”

“I don’t know as it’s your business, but I am,” replied Beard, with hostile gestures that plainly told Jim his room was more valued than was his company.

“You ought to be pretty sure,” Jim answered.

“Sure! You’ve taken on a pretty insulting way,

since I last met up with you," Beard answered calmly.

Brazos crowded forward. Jim edged back, as he said:

"You keep away, Brazos. This is my show, entire."

"No, it's mine; you men quit makin' threats," Kate cut in, ranging herself beside Brazos. Beard gazed at her admiringly.

"Looked at any of those wild cattle that are thrown in here?" Jim asked Beard, disregarding the two.

"Yes; they satisfy me."

"Say, Easton, you got any cattle on Low Mesa?" Brazos asked.

"No."

"Then where do yo' come in?"

"Where I want to. I always have an' I always will."

"Even to getting Prime Frazer to live with you an' back yore plays," said Kate sneeringly.

Jim's face flamed under the tan. The slash of Kate's venomous cut at Prime hurt him, and he did not know what it meant to Beard, previously poisoned with the lie about Prime's being under his control. Beard, seeing Jim flush so, thought that he was taken down at this public thrust at his relations with the girl. Thus Kate's shrewd hit more than ever convinced Beard that Kate was right all the way through, and that Easton was too low for a white man to associate with. Jim recovered his composure and took up the fight again.

"I want these cattle inspected for strays."

"They're just through th' round-up," Brazos declared.

"Lots can happen after a round-up, Kingston. I charge that there are cattle here belonging to Bolton

& Frazer, Circle Dot X," said Jim, in a desperate effort to force a delay, at least.

"There are none," Kate declared slowly.

"If there are a few, we'll pay for them or turn them back before they get off the mesa, as we drive," Beard decided. "Come, Easton, I've no time to fool with you. Let's ride, Mrs. Frazer."

He turned his horse about. Kate and Brazos followed, and Jim, seeing their backs, felt a wave of defeat surging over him. He turned about and only then saw that Pecos was watching the levels over which they had loped to meet Beard. Nothing was in sight back there then, but Pecos called:

"About fifty men're ridin' here. They're in that dip we passed. Watch th' rise this side."

They came over the rise, riding fast. The thunder of their coming went before, and Jim, turning, noted that Beard, Kate, and Brazos had heard them. Cattle careered from before the oncomers on either hand and stood at gaze, snorting warily.

"Pete Brennan! Harry! Our bunch and Pete's! Did José fly?" Jim was all excitement, and he waved his arm; then they came the faster. Jim yelled to Pecos to send them forward, and then he struck Brilar, and the horse sped like a true arrow toward Beard, Brazos, and Kate. They had pulled up by now, and Jim rode beyond them, blocking them off determinedly.

"What does this mean?" Kate demanded, with a show of almost convincing hauteur.

"Climb down, Mrs. Frazer," Jim said. "Yo've got to deal with Pete Brennan now."

If her breath came a bit short, they did not know it, so secure was her hold upon her emotions. If Brazos flicked one glance toward the open range to the north and yearned to spur away to safety, he did not betray himself. Beard was too astounded

to know what to do, and in a moment Pete came ranging up, and the combined Brennan and Circle Dot X outfits, with the Stranglers' grim following, reined in. Old Peter walked his horse forward and saluted Kate.

"Howdy, Missus Frazer."

"Howdy, Mr. Brennan! What's wrong?"

"Tha's what we're aimin' to find out. We've been told there's beeves bein' sold here that oughtn't be."

"I've full power to act in my husband's name for Bar Six," Kate informed him. "Bar Six backs this whole deal."

"I ain't disputing on that point, ma'am," he answered firmly, but politely. "But there's other cattle—say from Lost Cañon," and he glanced shrewdly at Brazos.

"They's no way in or out of Lost Cañon," Brazos replied, attempting to head off the attack. "How could cattle come from that hole?"

"Some one's lying. I'm goin' to find out who," Pete said. "Beard, you can't have these cattle till I've combed them."

"They're all in Bar Six brand," Brazos interrupted loudly.

"A man spoke to me like that once, Kingston, and he's daid now," Old Peter said slowly.

"Oh, I wasn't hinting——"

"Then don't. Now get out o' th' way. Get yore bunch of wild men t'gether. We're goin' to join forces here an' ride through these cattle. I want a closer herd of them all, and I may want those cattle from up north cut out an' set aside until I can find out about them. Mr. Beard can take the straight Bar Six stuff without question."

"That will suit me," Beard declared. He knew

that Pete Brennan would not talk so without some reason.

Kate bit her lips, and Brazos shifted about in his saddle and again gazed away toward the north. She edged him aside, and they conferred a moment. Then Kate spoke:

"We accept your conditions, though they're un-neighborly, Mr. Brennan, after all your talk of friendship for Ed Frazer."

"This isn't friendship; it's brass-tack range law," Pete replied. "An' you can do it to me, any time you see a cause. Now I'm not sayin' there's anything wrong, but I've got t' find out."

"Well, let her ride thataway," Brazos said.

What had Kate whispered to him? Just this:

"Better let them cut out those Lost Cañon steers. We can plead innocent on them and sell the Bar Six stuff. No one can prove how we got those Lost Cañon steers, except Trantor, and we can stop his mouth. If Brennan decides they're not ours, he won't know where to turn them in. We can get our share of them later and rustle them out of the region."

CHAPTER XXXIII

THROUGH THE DOOR

TRANTOR and a half dozen of his men now came in, having observed the approach of Brennan and the others. Brennan glanced aslant at Trantor, who shifted about uneasily in his saddle. Kate Frazer spoke up:

"We have hired Trantor and a lot of men, whom we had to pick up in a hurry. The old Bar Six bunch got so uppity I had to chase them, Mr. Brennan."

"So I parceeve," Pete said wryly. "But that's neither here nor over yander. Put yore crowd at work; we'll all get to work. Easton, I want those old Bar Six men busy, too. We can comb this mesa right sudden if we're spry an' sassy. I want those Lost Cañon cattle driven down closer in here; I want the real Bar Six stuff hazed up toward this place. We can cut them clean about here, make two herd o' them, an' I'll inspect them. Harry, you an' Kedge Mack take each half of our people; Easton, you ride north an' fog those Lost Cañon cattle down here."

"Why not let my men do that?" asked Brazos injudiciously. "They know those cattle."

"Brazos, I never yet heard of a steer that needed to be introduced to a cowboy by his first name. Easton, you ride north, and Brazos, you an' yore men ride plumb south an' round in yore men that are holding th' south edge of this mesa against the drift. Turn ever'thing up here. I'm done talkin' now. Ride!"

This last word was pronounced with a snap. Pete's hand fell to the butt of his gun. Brazos

yielded and snarled out the necessary orders to Trantor, who began at once the sending of such men as he had at hand to carry orders to the others of the wild bunch. Pete watched them ride with coldly glinting eyes. Brazos and Kate were talking in low tones. Pete called again:

"Brazos, the word is ride!"

"I was goin' to when I'd said my say to Missus Kate."

Pete did not heed the challenge in Brazos' tones then, but turned to give orders to others. As Brazos went away south, Kate said:

"I'm going back to Bar Six, Mr. Brennan. I ought to be with Ed."

"I'll stay to see the inspection of the herds," Beard decided.

Kate turned Thunder and rode away at an easy lope. Easton edged Silent aside and asked him in a low tone:

"Where are Prime an' the Adequate Lady?"

"They threw off us at Dead Hole. Prime told Miss Bolton there might be gun play, an' she didn't want her in it."

"Prime's head is plumb level on that," Jim said. "We ought to send word to them how things're goin'. What say you ride over there, then join us above on the north rim of th' mesa?"

Brennan told Jim that Carl and Vangie had turned up at Diamond Tail with the clew to events in Lost Cañon and the finding of the black beard connecting Trantor with the shooting of Ed Frazer, and Jim wondered that Brennan had not thrown down on and captured Trantor at once. But Silent said that it was Brennan's plan to let Trantor go on without his suspecting the truth, in the hope that, during the round-up of the cattle and subsequent events, things might be divulged more im-

portant still. The old Bar Six crowd and Brennan's men were under orders to be friendly to the wild bunch in order to allay suspicions, and to treat the round-up of the herds and the inspection as something that had to be done to satisfy public opinion, now that a complaint had been made.

Silent rode over toward Dead Hole and found Prime and Miss Bolton. As he concluded his recital Prime's eyes were ablaze with interest.

"I wish, Silent, I could do something—not sit here like a horned toad on the edge of this hole," she said.

"Well, Miss Prime, ride with us on the north rim o' Low Mesa. I think you'll be better up there with us than here, for, if some of those wild men o' Trantor's come this way, you might get some nasty mean sass, or something happen that'd lead to a shootin'. Pete Brennan wants to ride easy herd till he's ready to whirl his loop down."

"I'd like well to ride with you Bar Six wolves again, but Teresa couldn't stand that kind of work."

Teresa, who had been listening, put in a curious query now:

"Silent, did you say that woman rode back to Bar Six?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"Why?" Prime asked rather absently, for her mind was bent upon riding with Jim, Silent, Pecos, and the others.

"Oh, nothing, dearie. Only I think I'll ride back home. I'm only in the way out in the open. My place is at Circle Dot X. I can help Molly Polly around the house. There'll be a lot of cooking needed later this day. You will all ride in at night, starved out."

"Yo're more adequate ever' day, ma'am," Silent declared.

"If you feel thataway, I'm going to ride with Silent," Prime decided. She gave Teresa a hug and then mounted. Teresa swung up on her staid horse and began to amble back along the edge of Dead Hole. Prime and Silent hit out, at a warm lope, across the flat toward the rim of Low Mesa.

The steady beat of the horse's hoofs on the rocky going told Teresa of the thinness of the shelf, where the giant's wall was along the edge of the Hole. She reined in once or twice and timidly stood on her stirrups to peep over the wall into the abyss, but could not make it. Below, where the wall winged out, it pressed her away from the edge, and down there she kicked the old horse's sides until he came to the very verge and thus permitted her to look over. The desolation below, the white circle of the alkali hole made her shudder, and she was glad to get her horse ambling southward again.

The day had turned more cloudy, but the promise of rain was not realized. Little whirls of dust chased each other across flat places, funneled up, settled soundlessly into the tiny hollows, or died like far-blown puffs of smoke on the crests of ridges. Cattle, seeing them, raced a little, snorted, and then switched their tails uneasily. The wind came from all quarters, or even seemed to puff straight down, like a draught in a chimney.

Teresa had not the remotest idea of remaining at home. She stayed there just long enough to salve her conscience, helped Molly Polly a very little, and then mounted and rode again, after eating a snack. Perhaps Teresa did not have a definite plan in view, but she acted strangely like a person with an inkling of what she was about. She kicked the old stager's sides to get him into the rocking lope that was his limit and her own

idea of a real fast gallop. She knew the way about near home pretty well by now, and at the fork of the trail to Tin Cow she struck north to Bar Six.

Riding toward the big house Kate Frazer made time, after passing from the view of those farthest west. She let Thunder out to the full, and he bore her toward the big house with a rush. The dust devils were swirling across their path, as Thunder loped, and he snorted at them affrightedly.

Kate slatted the horse toward the home stables, before which she alighted and called peremptorily to the boy, who came to attend to Thunder's wants. She strode up the slope toward the house with a stride almost masculine. The cool, steady nerve of her was tightening, as the dangers drew in about her and Brazos. She did not mean to miss anything now that would make a point in her favor.

Annuncio came, jabbering and blatant with small complaints against other servants and her hard position, "Kept close to a sick man all the time."

Kate shoved her aside, as if the Mexican woman had been an animal, and went straight to Frazer's chamber.

The stricken man's eyes sought her face. He was decidedly better that day and whispered to her. She smiled and sat down at the edge of the bed.

"Ever'thing O. K.?" he asked.

"Surest thing, Ed. Beard is well pleased. I got away early, because it was no use staying. Brazos will attend to th' details."

His lined face lighted with pleasure. "You sure got a haid on you, Kate," he replied gratefully.

She smiled cheerfully, then turned to go out.

In the room, which she used, she found what she sought—the new will, not drawn in formal words, but as he had dictated it to her, signed shakily, but unmistakably, with his name. It gave her everything, except for a mere dole to Prime. So far as Ed knew, Prime had deserted him utterly, during his time of weakness and pain, and Kate had adroitly fostered his resentment against the girl, during the few days of his awakening consciousness. Kate put the paper in her bosom.

Annuncio came to ask if she was wanted.

“No; keep away,” Kate said. “I’ll be in here a long time yitty.”

Presently she went into Frazer’s room then and sat down beside him. He whispered a little, asking questions about several points of ranch management, which they had discussed in days just past. She answered him alertly. Her mind was wandering, however, to the question: “But how do it an’ be safe?”

Firearms had been tried and had failed. A shot would draw the entire household!

She made an excuse and went to a chest of drawers. There was a deer-horn-handled knife there, and the blade a fine example of Mexican work. She reached into the drawer and fingered that. The edge was keen.

The wind sucked in, and the white curtain flapped at her side. She started guiltily and dropped the knife into the drawer.

Ed spoke. “What you lookin’ for, Kate, love?”

Did any qualm aroused by his endearing whisper cause her to blench from her purpose? No! What had stopped her was this thought: A knife leaves a wound, and a wound will be investigated.

“He’s weak, and a little cord would strangle him,” she decided.

Her eyes ranged the room. "Fix my pillow, Kate, sweetheart," Ed said. "I like to feel yore cool hands smooth it under my head."

Her cool hands! She drew them away from him. Yes, they were cool—cold. Her will was bent on murder.

"Smooth my pillow for me, old sweetheart," he was pleading, a wan smile on his white face.

The wind sent the curtain in, then it snapped and billowed outside, as the back draft of the breeze took it.

"My pillow needs fixin'," he continued wearily. Yet if his voice was tired, his loyal eyes glowed with love, as he fixed them upon her in appeal.

And she? *The pillow! Soft, leaving no mark! Why not that?*

She sat on the edge of the bed at his head and reached under with both hands and firmly pulled the pillow out. His head fell to the bed with a jerk, and pain contracted his features.

"Kate, dear, what's off? Oh, Kate, what's in yore face?"

His whisper whistled in his throat. Her face, flushed with hellish passion, was over his white one, and her strong arms and hands flipped the pillow forward.

It was over his face. She threw herself upon it with all her power, held it down, smothering out his choking, sobbing efforts for breath. He was as a dead man, from his neck down, save for that little power in his right arm and hand.

The curtain flicked in again, snapping. Kate kept the suffocating thing over Ed's face. She did not want to see that face again. The accusing horror in it, as she had covered it for good, she hoped, had struck through to her inner citadel of fear. He knew now—he knew her purpose,

her evil heart. If she did not make an end now, she could not stay on Bar Six. She would be an outcast.

She held the pillow firm, and he ceased the struggle.

“Hussy!”

Over her shoulder Kate saw a woman come tumbling into the open window. It was Teresa! She sprang at the would-be murderess, with a low, sobbing cry of mingled horror and rage, doing what Miss Teresa Bolton, real estate expert of Omaha, never would have done—hitting, scratching, biting—anything to get that pillow off the face of the man who might even now be dead.

Her onset was so terribly effective that Kate had to shift to meet it, and Teresa, forgetting her gun, continued to strike and strive. Kate, used to taking her part, reached instinctively for Teresa’s gun, which Teresa had looked upon as an ornament. She jerked it out, and the two rolled to the floor together. Kate could feel the scratches which Teresa had inflicted, and a dull rage filled her against this interloper.

Outside Annuncio began to scream, and other Mexicans took up the cry, as the noise of the struggle came out to them. The women broke apart. As they came to their feet their natures were revealed in a flash by two actions.

Forgetting self, Teresa sprang to the bed and threw the pillow off Frazer’s face. Kate, with the gun, swung it up and pulled the trigger, with the muzzle full at Teresa’s back. The hammer fell uselessly. Teresa wheeled.

“I never had that loaded except when I wanted to take lessons from one of the boys.”

Kate flung the gun at her. “I’ll git one that’ll

shoot, an' I'll kill you!" And she darted from the room.

Teresa threw herself at the door and set the big bolts. She whirled, dragged the chest of drawers, with more strength than she ever had thought in her possession, so that it covered the open window. Then she fell across the bed, almost in a faint.

A groan from Frazer roused her. "Teresa Bolton, no weakness," she said aloud. Inch by inch she pulled herself erect.

A heavy body thudded against the bolted door. "Open up!" Kate ordered. A chorus of Mexican retainers gabbled outside the window.

Teresa turned to them first, calling out past the barricaded chest of drawers: "Good people, your mistress is a devil, and she has tried to kill the Señor Ed."

"She's a liar," Teresa heard Kate call down the hallway, leading to the outside.

Then some Mexican girl countered with: "It is the Señora Bolton who says this."

And now Teresa had a reward for her goodness to José Almonté. It had been whispered by the kitchen route from the inn of Felicé's father to the Mexicans who had passed to and from Tin Cow, and Teresa's fame was golden among the Mexicans. So they hesitated now.

"Open that door!" Kate demanded anew.

"I won't open unless Mr. Peter Brennan says so," Teresa answered decisively.

"I'll shoot, then."

There was another groan from Ed. Teresa, with fine disregard for the consequences, cried out: "Shoot, then."

The crash of the gun, the splintering of the door, the very wind of the ball, told Teresa how

deadly was the purpose of the woman with whom she had to deal. She threw herself on to the floor at the side of the bed and bethought herself of a stratagem. Gaspingly she exclaimed: "Oh, I am hit!"

Then she was silent, as she tugged at Frazer, whose body was lightened by his sufferings. A second bullet came crashing, this time cutting across the creased bed clothing. Teresa got Ed off the bed onto the floor, with the bed between her and the door. She worked silently, packing the blankets on the side of Frazer nearest the door. In a twinkling she had a thick pad of wool between him and danger, a shield that would hold a bullet from penetrating the flesh. She heard Kate's order to Annuncio:

"Go get some of th' men to smoke this woman out."

By creeping to a low stand, where medicines were, Teresa got water and bathed Ed's temples. She noted that he was breathing regularly again.

There was a lull now in the uproar outside the door. Teresa tiptoed about the room. Her toe struck a bit of paper. She bent over to pick it up. She glanced at it. Her quick comprehension, made keen in legal terms and papers, proved to her that it was a will. She concealed it under the bed quickly.

Now at the window and before the door, voices were heard. Teresa caught the heavy whispers of cow-punchers, two or three. Kate's orders crisped in between their phrases. Then there was a long silence.

Teresa again gave her attention to Frazer, whose eyes were open. She spied a comb on the chest of drawers. Dipping it in the water she began to comb out his tangled hair.

Kate began to issue further orders outside, and Ed found his voice:

"Yo're th' Adequate Lady, ain't you? My eyes ain't real good yet."

"That's what the boys call me."

"Open that door!" A man's voice issued the order.

"Tell him to pull his freight," Ed whispered.

"Mr. Frazer says to get away," Teresa said.

"Pay no attention to her! She's in there against my will. Mr. Frazer can't talk!" Kate was lying glibly.

Ed tried to raise his voice, but it broke in a faint whisper.

"Never mind, they ain't going to come in," Teresa said, leaving his side.

A heavy weight struck the door, making it shiver; another crashed against the chest of drawers. Trusting the door to hold, Teresa put her weight against the chest and set it firmly back against the window.

The light outside was failing, but she could see through a crack beside the chest. Her glance into its top drawer had shown her it was mostly filled with blankets rolled tightly, and she thought they would turn any bullets shot into it from the outside. Again the weight struck the door, and it groaned and began to splinter.

There was a period of waiting. Teresa, seeing the crumpled will under the bed, did a most extraordinary thing for a law-abiding woman. She sprang upon it and began to tear it to bits, scattering the shreds all about the room.

"I know I'm breaking a score of laws, made and provided against such a crime," she thought, "but that woman never shall have Bar Six."

The door leaped again, as the attack was renewed.

CHAPTER XXXIV

DEAD HOLE

WITH the Lost Cañon cattle firmly held ahead of his cordon of top riders, Jim Easton drifted them down toward the rendezvous. He knew he had most of them; the others would come forth when the Bar Six stuff was combed and cut clean. Prime Frazer had taken her fair share in the gathering in.

Riding had heightened Prime's color. If she could have forgotten her troubles she would have been happy, for often Jim and the boys had praised her for clever work during the long hours of circling and hazing the cattle into a loose-held band.

The dust devils were mounting now, higher and higher, and falling into nothingness, as suddenly as they were sucked up and set to spinning at the caprice of the winds. As each one swirled in among the cattle the beeves would snort and run a little, then settle down. It was warm work at times, when some of the wild cattle tried to break back, bellowing and pawing at the ground.

Below Easton's rendezvous the Bar Six stuff was being herded to the meeting place by the big bunch whom Brennan had brought, and Brazos and his men. When any of the Brennan crowd met one of the wild bunch he preserved a tight mouth, despite all attempts to draw forth some expression that would serve as a guide to possible action later. Jarvis Larrabee and Harry Brennan had kept together, Larrabee staying away from the old Bar Six crowd at Pete's suggestion, in order to aid in recognizing real Bar Six stuff.

Several times Malpais Pete, Windy Crashin, Bill Janthorpe and others of Brazos' crowd tried to get him to consider the case as they saw it. They managed several times, despite Harry Brennan's vigilance, to bunch together and talk. The burden of it was this complaint of Malpais Pete's to Brazos, as they were drifting the herd north to the meeting place:

"I never knew no good of keepin' close to these Strangers. The boys are leery entire."

"You ride at my orders, Malpais," Brazos replied.

"Brazos, we come here to do a certain job, market those cattle through Bar Six's reputation, an' so make an outlet for rustled cattle from th' whole north ranges. We didn't come here to run into no Strangler's noose."

"What's yore plan, then?" sulkily asked Brazos, to gain time by letting him talk.

"I got this one, Brazos: When th' herds come together we'll bunch up. When th' cattle are on-easy over one of these big dust devils, start something, and a stampede'll result. Start 'em rollin' their tails toward Dead Hole. When th' other bunch is headin' them off, we can get a start an' run for it."

"They'll ride you down, you fools."

"Some of us'll git out. As it is, I'm 'fraid of that Brennan! He's got a wall eye when he's mad. I never trusted a wall eye yet."

Malpais Pete sagged over sidewise to rest himself in his saddle. Then he spoke again: "Th' bunch has made me spokesman."

"I'll think it over."

"We have already. So long," crisply replied Malpais Pete, as he edged away quietly.

Brazos swept his eyes over that crowd of hard-faced men as Malpais joined them and spoke a

word. Then they all flashed their glances on to him, as he rode alone now. The cattle were going gently. The clouds were low, but it was not a day for rain, since the air was dry and cool, having turned so about the time the gathering of the cattle was begun.

The Lost Cañon herd could be seen coming. Brennan, with a small group of men, was out on the flat land, where he had set the rendezvous. They were like dots off there, with the two herds closing in on them.

The Bar Six cattle drove well, for they had been under loose herd long enough to be somewhat under the discipline of man. Kedge Mack was slowly riding point, with the other veteran Stranglers strung along the wings of the point groups; the younger men were in rather disorderly fashion along the flanks of the herd. There was hardly any drag, for the cattle were fresh, full fed, and looking, it would seem, for bed ground. Yet, when a dust devil would swirl in among them and sink to rest, leaving a weal of white dust across the vista of moving backs, the beasts would bawl, and their horns would rattle. Then they would step forward again, and the men behind the drag would sing some stirring trail-herd song.

Brazos thought all would be well yet. Malpais was singing with the others, smiling and easeful; he got to one side and watched a big dust devil with perverse force circle the drag and cut in toward the middle of the herd. Then he began to tug at his slicker and said:

"This thing was tied in a hurry, an' it's all in a mess. I'll have to fold it smooth."

Just as the dust devil billowed in, funneling high and revolving on its broad base. Malpais

got the slicker by a corner. Then his horse began to buck, to sunfish, coming down shoulder by shoulder, and then went to leaping and plunging. At every leap Malpais yelled, and the slicker, held in one hand, fluttered. He was being carried right at the herd. His horse seemingly was out of control, and at every leap the mean-faced steed made, the yellow slicker flapped and snapped.

"Turn him—fall off, you jack rabbit!" Jarvis yelled.

He spurred forward, was unaccountably involved in the rush of a dozen of the wild bunch, and still Malpais Pete was going at the herd, apparently being run away with. The cattle snorted, bunched, and then all the beeves on that side of the herd broke. Like lightning the panic spread through the loose-held herd, and the animals had taken up the "slack" and were compacted together.

The point men flashed against the flank of the running cattle nearest them, with the cow-puncher's instinctive effort to make the cattle "mill" at once. The wild bunch, however, acting in what seemed like good faith to dense Jarvis, cannonaded against the side of the herd nearest them, and that set the stampede in full swing. Harry Brennan saw it was useless to try to stop it suddenly, and he rode alongside the first of the running steers. Guns began to pop here and there, as men tried to smoke the beeves into turning.

Pete Brennan, at the meeting place, could be seen to spur for the edge of the mesa, at an angle toward the plunging herd. A huge dust devil, towering up, almost a young "twister," came for the herd, just as it seemed they would slacken, and then it was the old story. Malpais had brought his horse under control and was running him beside the herd. He had dropped his slicker.

Brazos ranged alongside, and his face was black.

"Why didn't you wait?" he asked, raising his voice over the noise of the herd.

"Wait? Yes, you play safe. I can read yore mind, Brazos Kingston. If we got noosed, yo'd squeal, or play th' high an' mighty big ranchman. We know how yo've made up to that near-widow o' Frazer's. Wait? Th' bunch'll wait at that wall along th' rim o' Dead Hole f'r me—no longer."

Then he was gone ahead. Brazos quirted Comet to overtake him. Comet swerved to avoid some sandy patches that might have thrown him, if he had struck them at top speed, going in over his fetlocks. Malpais had rounded them skillfully. So the two were separated for the moment.

Malpais was not so far ahead now. Brazos saw, over to the left, that the Lost Cañon herd was holding together in a little cup of land, into which he could look, as he flashed over a tiny swell. Malpais was only a trifle ahead then, and Brazos reined in a little. He would not overtake Malpais when they were in view of others. He wanted to come upon Pete when they were not under surveillance, if that were possible.

Now the noise of the stampeding cattle was like thunder. The horses had caught the contagion and were racing for the head of the herd, as they had been trained.

A horseman flashed past Brazos, a grim man, gripping the great barrel of his roan with iron thighs. At sight of him Brazos smiled, as Comet sprang forward, for this man's coming would take Malpais off his hands! It was old Pete Brennan. His gun flashed out and flamed, and Malpais pitched from his saddle, his horse careering on.

Brennan flashed a glance aside at Brazos. His voice, heavy with menace, came over the sound of

the thundering hoofs: "I saw him start that stampede. See what comes of tryin' to cross the Stranglers!"

"I was after him myself," Brazos replied, as his horse jumped over the prone body, but Brennan was off again at yet a swifter pace.

They were close to the head of the herd by now. The others were coming up fast. The cattle, in pouring into and climbing out of the creek bed, that bisected the mesa, lost time. Now the punchers began to try to turn the herd or to slow it down. But the beeves came on sullenly, faster now.

"Got to turn them before we hit Dead Hole," Harry Brennan said to his father, who nodded.

They streamed off the mesa to the flat land. The cattle were slowing down a little now. The punchers were ahead. Thus matters seemed well in hand. It was then that it was seen that the wild bunch had drawn together. Suddenly, while the others fought to force the stampede aside, or start a mill, the wild bunch rode for the edge of Dead Hole, where, according to their plan with Malpais Pete, they were to wait. Trantor, who had been out of sight, now appeared in the foreground as the leader of the wolf crew.

The Brennan crowd was too busy trying to save the cattle to take exception to this desertion, for such only they thought it to be. Brennan had not had time as yet to tell any one of his crowd about his killing of Malpais and his reasons therefore.

With a rush of spurring men the Bar Six bunch now joined with them. Jim Easton, riding at their head, with Prime alongside, got old Pete's ear, as he flashed into the line against the face of the maddened herd.

"My cattle were holding well, but they started

a run north, so I let them go. We can get them later. Got to stop these now. Two men went with 'em to watch."

Brennan bellowed a word of approval. The horses by now were fairly leaping on to the sides of the cattle, which were packing in front and halting, while the pressure from behind increased, and the herd's center was a vortex of bovine power and mischief. The herd would not turn, but kept gaining ground by plunging starts and fits, each exerting greater power. It was soon seen that only by getting right in front of it and shooting it out cold, could there be a chance of turning the crazed beesves aside or back. The only hope that remained was that they could be made to mill.

Over along the giant's wall rimming Dead Hole the wild bunch was watching, having swung down to tighten cinches, preparatory to their ride for freedom. They were not going to run for it until some climax came to center attention away from them. And Malpais was not yet with them.

Brazos took a part with the Bar Six hands, fighting for a hold against the stampeding cattle. By now they were close to the edge of Dead Hole, and Prime, whipping out her guns, began to shoot. Her act was the signal for the others, and now, flash on flash and answering flash, the sixes talked, and the cattle, blenching back, would have turned, if the terrible rushes from the rear had not borne them on. A few had detached themselves from the pressure of the main body, and these, indeed, did begin to turn south. Prime threw herself right before the herd, and her horse fought tooth and hoof to keep from being driven back. The hollow rock under them rang and rang again at the trampling of the tons and tons of horses and cattle. Here was no giant's wall to keep them

from being swept over, first fruits of a rain of death, into the pit below.

Seeing Prime in such peril the men crashed forward to stand or go over with her. Her hair had escaped bounds and streamed back over her shoulders. Before spurring into that place of worst peril she had filled her hot gun from her thimble belt, and now, right and left, she sent the balls into the front of the herd, her eyes flaming. Jim, his heart bursting with pride at her grit, yet thrilling with fear for her safety, smashed a way beside her, and together they fought for the salvation of the great herd.

It had all been a swirl of effort, with no room for coherent thought. Harry Brennan came to stand with them and fairly threw his horse at the horned front of the sullen herd, as a few more turned south. Of a sudden he slumped forward and would have fallen under their hoofs, but Prime, her last cartridge gone, saw it and spurred to his side and got a strong arm about him. It was then that Jim, looking over his shoulder, saw that the wild bunch, on the lower end of the giant's wall, were shooting at the Brennan and Bar Six crowds, as they fought there on the brink of destruction. Trantor's men were shooting to make them lose the fight, and men and cattle would go over the edge together, and in the resulting catastrophe all evidence against the wild bunch would be blotted out. For, if the human beings gave way, the horses would, and then the mad cattle would pour over into the yawning abyss of Dead Hole. Jim's eyes caught a bare glimpse of Trantor, as the gunman threw his weapon forward to shoot again.

Jim, with his eyes aflame, whipped his guns over and shot, catching Trantor squarely. He pitched over the wall to death. Jim fired again and saw

two of the wild bunch tumble off the wall. Then the very earth seemed to shake, and something struck the fighting herd's side.

The Lost Cañon herd, headed by the wild cattle that had assumed leadership of it, as wild beeves generally do among range cattle, had run north, driven by the fear of a dust devil. Jim had let them go, deeming them out of control for the time, and headed in a direction where they would do no harm. They could be picked up later. Calling to Silent and Pecos to stay with them, Jim had ridden to help Pete Brennan's crowd hold the big Bar Six herd.

After running a mile, the Lost Cañon herd stopped and wheeled at right angles, heading southeast toward Dead Hole, at that point where the giant's wall rimmed it.

What struck the side of the Bar Six herd was the Lost Cañon herd, all out of control, led by the huge, black, sharp-horned wild cattle. They came quartering, and a square half of them sheered across the corner of the Bar Six herd and turned it down trail, along the edge, the very rim of Dead Hole.

The other half, splitting on the mighty end of the giant's wall, came upon the men on and against the wall, as they shot and watched the noisy turmoil below them. The frenzied cattle were against the wall, like a living wave, piling up and up, crushing men, driving others to the pinnacles of the rocks on the verge, and still the cattle piled and strove; and then men, cattle, and horses were in a maelstrom of frenzy in that place of direct peril.

Even as Jim and Pete watched, while Prime held Harry in his saddle, the weight of the thousand cattle frenziedly fighting, dying, piling up against

the giant's wall, was too great for the thin shelf of rock to sustain. With a crash it broke away, and a huge semicircle of the Hole's rim, with the giant's wall, the thousand cattle, the men of the wild bunch—all went plunging into the abyss! And, even as it did so, the Bar Six cattle running true now, were filing safely downtrail, turning after their new stampeding leaders.

Thrilled with horror at the outcome, Jim, Prime, and their friends let the saved cattle run. From below came a few groans and high-pitched bawling of dying cattle and horses; then a great silence enwrapped in clouds of dust. Prime called for help. Pete got to her first and eased Harry down. He was found to have a bullet through his right shoulder. Prime alighted, cut away the shirt, and began to look at the wound. Jim Easton heard some one calling, and, across the gulf left by the fall of the rim rock, he was able now to see Pecos waving his hat. Jim cupped his hands and answered.

Pecos called: "Any one hurt?"

"No, you-all safe?"

"Surest thing. We tried to gain time by headin' round a dry arroyo, but th' rain had juiced up a sand hole there. We got mired, an' they got ahaid o' us."

"Where's Silent?"

"Rode after Brazos. He went to Bar Six, saying Brazos wasn't ridin' there for no good an' to tell you."

Jim glanced about. Brazos was not in sight! He felt a vague uneasiness. He went to Prime's side, as she worked over Harry, and told Brennan crisply of Brazos' going.

"Go get him," Brennan said, over his shoulder.

Jim twirled Brilar about on the very verge of

the Hole, touched the good horse once with the steel, and then they were off. Brilar had been ridden since dawn, yet the generous spirit had another wild burst of energy left for the master, the god whose voice was the music of life. Across the flat land and then up the edge of the mesa away to the front, Silent rode. Brilar's thrumming hoofs drummed Silent up, and the friends swept along together.

"Give me some .45's," Jim called, and Silent passed them over, as they rode side by side.

"I feel that Brazos rode to Bar Six for no good," Jim said. "I'm going on alone."

While the turmoil increased, thus preventing Ed Frazer's whispers from reaching the ears of those of the good Mexicans, who would have understood and forced at least a diversion in her favor, Teresa could hear Kate Frazer giving her orders for a final assault upon the door of the bedroom. The window had ceased to engage her attention, for she could tell from the noise that only Mexican retainers were outside, for the most part women and older men or boys. But in the space before the door were at least two men and the desperate woman.

With a louder crash, the door shook against its fastenings; then the next smashing blow splintered a panel. A hand reached in, fumbling for the bolt inside there. Teresa picked up a low stool and hurled it. The wrist was snatched back. Teresa ducked behind the bed. An arm came in, a woman's arm, and a gun flamed. The bullet cut across the bedclothes and thudded into the wall. Teresa heard Ed Frazer groan, and she felt for the leg of the chair at that side of the bed. The noise out of the window had ceased of a sud-

den, and she feared it was a ruse, covering a rush from that quarter.

Again the hand came in, feeling for the bolt. Teresa stood upright to throw the chair. A gun flamed through the broken panel, and the intrepid woman went down, as the chair was launched from her hand. Then, as the hand came in to find the lock and to draw the bolt, Teresa did not get up to meet the new menace. At the same moment the huge chest of drawers began to move, to slide, and then it was still. Outside all was silent. Now came a heavy step, telling of the arrival of a new attacker outside the door. His heavy voice growled menacingly.

"Now, in and get her," Kate's voice said, hard, clear.

"Finish it," said Brazos, who had just arrived and been informed of how matters stood. The three men plunged at the door. It splintered again. A pause followed, then they crashed forward, all three together, their guns ready.

The door flew open. The three men leaped inside. Behind the bed Teresa crouched over the body of Frazer. They lined their guns up, and then a voice said:

"Turn them this way. There's a man here!"

Big Jim Easton burst from behind the displaced chest of drawers, his guns in line, his eyes flaming.

Crash on crash of flaming guns ensued, while the smoke billowed all through the chamber. Crash, and yet again the guns flamed, and then silence.

Jim, erect, held to the corner of the chest of drawers, swaying weakly. A woman's head came into the empty doorway to view the three men, whom he had outshot, outgamed, with his skill. The stamp of death rested on all three.

Then the beautiful temptress paled, as Jim

snarled: "Go; I spare you. After all yo're Ed's wife."

The head of the woman disappeared, and her feet could be heard, as she started for the open air, down the hall. So much Jim was aware of, and then he crumpled. Teresa sprang to catch him and gently supported him until he was lying across the foot of the bed, a red stream flowing from his forehead.

Kate Frazer, driven by fear for the first time since she had begun her criminal course, sped to the stables. Earlier she had given orders to keep Thunder ready for the trail. Now, in a panic of terror, she called for the horse and, as he came out, sprang into the saddle suddenly, starting the nervous animal into a series of prancings and springy strides, such as he always indulged in before settling down for business.

With the one thought of getting away, Kate jerked on the bit, and the horse, for the first time getting the mastery of her, got the bit firm in his teeth and reared. Kate, with manlike strength, yanked viciously on the reins, and the bit flew loose against the back of Thunder's tender mouth. The horse reared, screamed, and toppled, coming down in a heap, his back hurt. Kate Frazer, under him, saw the sun for the last time, as the good animal, whom she had abused so often, crushed her blackened soul to oblivion, in his convulsive efforts to get up.

CHAPTER XXXV

BEST CRITTER EVER

HIS wounds dressed, his strength restored, Jim Easton leaned across the bed in his old room in the big house. On the bed was Harry Brennan, and nursing him was Prime, a happy Prime, yet strangely shy. Harry began to laugh.

"The doctor, he said yo're not to use those lungs too much," Prime warned him.

"Then give me yore hand, Prime."

Harry took it, while Jim looked hungrily on.

For two weeks now Prime had hung over Harry as if he were the chief object of her desire, and Jim had been pushed aside, it seemed, for the girl had grown oddly timid in his presence; at times she had actually avoided him. At first, knowing she was worried about her father's condition and Teresa's, he did not wonder. But as Teresa recovered from her nervous shock and began to nurse Ed Frazer, Prime had more time. Yet it all went to Harry, it seemed.

Jim, back in his old job, with the old bunch under him, felt easy on the score of the interests of the big ranch. Over at Circle Dot X two men kept all safely. Carl and Vangie were down from Brennan's, and Pappy Yeagers had been sent away on a pension to relatives in Dodge. Brazos and Kate were long since buried, and the Stranglers had gone, disappointed by the maw of Dead Hole of their prey. José and Felicé, happily wedded, were attached to Bar Six by firmer bonds of love than of yore.

Prime gave Harry her hand, and he held it a

while. He pushed it up and asked Jim mischievously:

"Isn't it a fine hand, Jimmie?"

"Harry, it's the finest ever," replied Jim chokingly.

"Then, you long-eared, dog-faced, pigeon-toed loon, why don't you take it? It's never goin' to be for me, an', after myself, I like you best of all th' men in th' world," Harry said, laying the hand over into Jim's.

"Oh, Prime——" Jim began.

"Don't mind me; I'll cover my head with th' bedclothes; bless ye, children," said Harry and obligingly turned the bedclothing up to hide his face from them. But his ears heard a smacking sound, often repeated, and then Prime exclaimed:

"Harry Brennan! Aren't you ashamed?"

"Yes, that I didn't get you, but I'll dance at yore weddin' and be th' best man."

"Low-flung, ornery son of a chucka-wallaw," replied Jim and reached down to hug him carefully and tenderly, while Prime's happy tears dropped on the face that was wreathed in a smile that had in it a hint of sadness.

Just a year later, as the moon came up and the fountain splashed beside the big house, Ed Frazer, just back from Omaha, where Teresa had had him taken to be operated upon, walked out, unaided and almost as strong as ever, into the silvery light. Beside him was a woman whose arm was about him. He drew her to him and kissed her.

"I never thought, Teresa, I'd find heart happiness like this again. Yo've made us all happy. Our three months o' honeymoonin' has made me into a brand new geezer."

Prime stole out to join them, and then Jim came, holding a mite of humanity who was the

pledge that the old Bar Six brand would go down to at least the third generation of Frazers.

"Th' boys named you well, yo're sure the Adequate Lady," Jim said to Teresa.

Prime's portion of her happiness was a hug. Down in the bunk houses the boys held high wassail, and José was strumming on the guitar which the bunch had bought him six weeks before for a wedding anniversary gift. The lilt of it came up to them as the men sang, with Carl Trescott leading, Carl's favorite melody:

"Ah, load mah gun wid a sugar plum,
And Ah shoot them greaser gals, one by one. .
Roll yo' tail an' roll it high;
You will be an angleworm, bymebye."

The little mite of humanity in Jim's arms stirred, cooed, and laughed. Ed, hearing it, laughed contentedly and said:

"Best critter ever born on Bar Six."

THE END.

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